

Grooming Ferrets
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Pet ferrets require very little routine grooming. In fact, excessive grooming can lead to health problems and should be avoided. If we think about how the ferret lived in the wild, it wasn't necessary for them to go to a ferret beauty shop to stay neat and tidy! Ferrets are fastidious and clean creatures and we need to complement and not interfere with that habit. The basic areas of grooming covered will be the haircoat, ears, and nails.

All ferrets have a normal distinct musky odor that is part of their character as a species. Anyone wishing to care for a ferret should be tolerant of this odor and not spend the rest of the pet's life trying to make it smell like a coconut or a pine tree! If the odor is offensive, DON'T GET A FERRET

Hair Coat

A ferret's hair coat consists of a soft, fine short-haired, cream-colored undercoat covered by long, coarse guard hairs. The guard hairs provide the color of the ferret's coat. The undercoat increases in density in the winter to retain body heat and becomes less dense during warm seasons. Although the color of the

undercoat remains the same, the color of the guard hairs can change at different times during the ferret's life. The distinctive markings on the face known as the mask can also change.

Normal changes in coat color or mask configuration occur during aging, reproductively active periods in either sex (if they are not neutered), and with the changing of the seasons. The coat color may lighten in winter, perhaps to provide better camouflage in the snow, and darken in the summer. The coat color can sometimes change after a surgery. The ferret's wild natural color is what we refer to as sable, which is a dark brown or black coloring of the extremities and mask. True albinos (white coat with eyes that have no iris pigment and appear pink) also occur in the wild. Humans have genetically altered ferrets to produce a variety of other colors that range from light browns to gray. Colors not normally found in the wild, such as "panda" or "silver," may revert to all white as the pet matures. Some ferrets have been bred to have longer coats.

Ferrets replace their hair coat at least twice a year through a process called molting. Molting is under hormonal control and is triggered by the changes in the photoperiod, or amount and intensity of light the ferret is exposed to. The most dramatic molt is often the spring molt when the thick warm undercoat of the winter is lost within a few days. Ferrets can look as if they have suddenly turned into fluffy little snowballs because the hair is shed quickly. The fall molt is less dramatic because there is less hair to shed from the summer. Ferrets that have not been neutered exhibit more distinct and dramatic molts than their neutered relatives do.

In addition, keeping ferrets under artificial lighting, as opposed to natural light of the outdoors, may change the time and intensity of the molts. If a ferret loses hair artificially, such as when they are clipped for surgery, and it is not near the time of a molt, it may be weeks to months before hair regrowth is seen. The new hairs coming slowly through the thick skin give it a bluish appearance. This blue coloring can be mistaken for a skin disorder. Wait a few days and the new hairs will protrude from the skin and the mystery is solved! Along with the molt there can also be a seasonal hair loss on the tail, which usually resolves on its own. The cause of this disorder is unknown but it may well be related to hormonal imbalances.

The fur should be shiny and thick, never dull or dry. Abnormalities in the hair coat such as hair loss, texture and quality changes should be investigated. External parasites such as fleas, ticks and mites can cause abnormalities, but are usually visible to the naked eye. The most common cause for hair loss in a mature neutered male or female ferret is adrenal gland disease. The most common cause for hair loss in an intact female ferret during her reproductive active cycle (estrus) is from the effects of hormones.

Normal ferret skin is smooth and pink without flakes, scabs or discoloration. In the wild ferrets would spend a portion of their day in underground dens where there is a constant temperature of 55°F and high humidity. In our homes in the winter, the air can be dry and warm, which can dehydrate the ferret's skin. If the skin is dry, you may notice small white flakes all over. In addition, the ferret may scratch frequently. Use a cold air humidifier, not a warm air vaporizer, in your pet's room in the winter.

In addition to the humidifier you can also use emollient skin sprays directly on the ferret to add moisture to the skin and hair coat. These sprays are not a replacement for a good diet and a clean environment but may help moisturize the skin and hair coat when their air is dry. In addition, ferrets are designed to eat a diet high in fat and if they do not receive sufficient amounts their skin can become dry and flaky. If

correcting the humidity level of the environment and adding fatty acid supplements to the diet does not help, then further investigation of abnormally dry skin is needed. Ferrets suffering from adrenal gland disease can often exhibit very itchy skin as well.

Note that normal ferrets scratch themselves with great gusto and you can hear the ferret's foot hitting the floor as well as their chattering from rooms away! Don't mistake the vigorous sounds of normal occasional scratching with an abnormality.

Any lumps, scabs or discoloration of the skin should be investigated as soon as possible by a veterinarian. Skin cancer is a common problem in ferrets and can be successfully cured with early treatment.

Ferrets have a specific musky body odor produced by oil glands in the skin.

This odor is normal for this species and should be appreciated and not avoided by continually trying to cover it up with perfumes or baths. In unneutered ferrets of both sexes, the odor of the skin, hair coat and urine is pungent, particularly when they are reproductively active. Neutered ferrets have a much milder scent and it is not at all unpleasant to those of us who have lived with these charming creatures. Very little of the odor of any ferret comes from the anal (scent) glands. These glands are expressed only when the ferret is frightened and the scent lingers for a short time. The majority of ferrets sold in the United States are already neutered and descented so you will likely never experience anal gland odor in your pet.

The bottom line is that all ferrets have a normal distinct musky odor that is part of their character as a species. Anyone wishing to care for a ferret should be tolerant of this odor and not spend the rest of the pet's life trying to make it smell like a coconut or a pine tree! If the odor is offensive, DON'T GET A FERRET!

The quality of the hair coat and skin is a reflection of the pet's internal health. The building blocks of health are contained in the diet. Ferrets are obligate carnivores and are designed to eat a diet rich in fat and animal protein and low in carbohydrates. Any of the following dietary factors can create hair and skin abnormalities: too much carbohydrate, too little fat or lack of specific fatty acids, and low quality or low amounts of protein. Ferrets are neither people nor dogs and cannot be at the peak of their health unless they are fed a diet appropriate to their species. The optimum diet for a ferret is made up of primarily of high-quality animal protein and animal fat. If an optimum diet is being fed there should be no reason to feed supplements such as vitamins. For a detailed discussion of appropriate ferret diets read the handout [Rethinking the Ferret Diet](#).

Avoid exposing your ferret to substances that will dehydrate the hair coat, such as clay kitty litter. I do not like clay or clumping kitty litter for several reasons, such as it is not compostable, the fine dust produced can get into the ferret's nose and eyes, and when a ferret plays in the litter box the clay dust coats the fur and skin and is very dehydrating. Use pelleted bedding made from wood, grass or cellulose. Pelleted bedding is cleaner, safer, more absorbent and less dehydrating than clay litters. In addition, avoid using perfumed fabric softeners or detergents on the bedding or on the cage because they can be harsh on the ferret's respiratory tract as well as the fur and skin. A dirty cage environment can also be detrimental to the fur and skin.

Many people ask if they should bathe their ferret. Well, the answer may surprise you. In my opinion, the answer is... not at all! That's right, you do not need to bathe a healthy ferret. Ferrets will groom their fur and keep it clean and tidy without any help from us. In fact, bathing can strip the skin of essential oils and leave it dry and itchy. Many people bathe their ferrets because they think they smell bad. The natural odor will always quickly return and bathing is a losing battle if it is being done as a long-term solution to mask their natural scent. I never routinely bathed my ferrets and they lived outdoors as well as indoors. In fact the ones that lived outdoors had the least odor! I also never combed or brushed my ferrets, which most ferrets dislike. If you have ever tried to hold a ferret still for anything they don't want to do, you know what I mean! In addition, bathing is not the most effective way to control fleas, so that reason goes right out the window as well. It is better to spot clean your ferret as needed than to bathe frequently.

There are times, however, when a bath is appropriate, such as when the ferret

- Gets into a foreign substance that needs to be removed quickly
- Is ill and can't groom himself, particularly if there is stool or urine accumulation on the fur
- If people in the household have allergies to the ferret. The allergy is usually a response to the dander on the skin. In these cases it is necessary to bathe the pet routinely to reduce the amount of allergens produced from the pet's skin to protect the owner's health.

If you need to bathe your ferret you may need to introduce him to water gradually, although some ferrets LOVE to play in shallow (1 inch) water as a game, and many people allow their ferrets to have this enriching experience at least once a week.

Allowing your pet to play in shallow warm water can be a start. Use a gentle, neutral scented pet shampoo. Put a bland eye ointment in the eyes to protect them from the soap. Always check the temperature of the water before bathing. We had a tragic case a few years ago of two ferrets that were put in water for a bath that was too hot. The little guys sustained second and third degree burns. They survived the incident, but avoid this outcome by testing the water first.

Either wet the ferret under a stream of warm water or dip him into a tub of warm water. Apply a small amount of shampoo to the body and gently massage it all over, avoiding the head. Rinse the shampoo off with the running water or in a large tub of clean water. Pat him dry with towels and then let keep him in a warm, but not hot, area until he is completely dry. Bathe your pet only when necessary and no more often than every two weeks. Take particular care with elderly, sick or very young ferrets because they can chill easily when wet, which makes them more susceptible to disease. There are many ferret sources you can consult that describe the bathing process in more detail.

Ears

Ferrets normally produce a large amount of reddish-brown earwax. The wax in the ears is there for a purpose; it protects the ear canal and ear surface, acting to trap debris that might enter. It is produced daily and will naturally work its way out of the ear canal and the ferret then scratches or shakes the old wax away. Ferrets will scratch their ears occasionally throughout the day. If your pet is scratching her

ears frequently, if there are scabs, lumps or bumps around the ears or if there is so much wax it actually fills the ear canal, you should seek veterinary assistance.

So, how often should you clean a ferret's ears? Once again, the answer may surprise you. You don't need to clean a healthy ferret's ears at all! I know we like our pets to be neat and clean and messy earwax is disturbing to some, but it is not disturbing to the ferret. As long as the ear canal is not obstructed and the ferret is showing no discomfort in her ears, there is no health or medical reason to clean them. The problem with cleaning too often is that you can inadvertently push wax down into the ear canal. The ear canal becomes impacted with wax, which can cause a hearing loss. You will probably be unable to detect any small hearing loss in your pet. However, for the pet a loss of hearing may be quite disturbing.

The moist interior of the ear canal is a perfect breeding ground for bacteria and if the flow of air through the canal is blocked an ear infection could be the result. If wax is indeed obstructing the ear canal, do not use a cotton swab to try to dig it out because you will only end up packing the wax further into the ear canal. Instead, use a few drops of hydrogen peroxide or mineral oil in the ear, which will soften the wax. The ferret will eventually remove the wax by shaking his/her head. If there is a lot of wax and the hydrogen peroxide or oil doesn't work within a couple of days, then you should seek veterinary assistance.

If you must clean the ears because you are entering your ferret in a show or you are on your way to see great aunt Bessie and she just HATES dirty ears, then go ahead, but proceed carefully. It is probably easiest to hold the ferret by scruffing her. Grab the skin along the back of the neck firmly and lift her until her feet just leave the ground. Most adult ferrets will stay very calm in this position, allowing minor procedures to be performed.

You can offer a treat on a spoon to further distract your pet during the procedure. You can use a fatty acid supplement or a high-protein treat, such as strained meat baby food or canned cat food. I prefer to avoid sweetened treats, like cat hairball laxatives, because many ferrets suffer from insulinoma, a cancer of the pancreas, and the extra sugar could aggravate the condition. Clean only the outer part of the ear and do not put the cotton swab into the ear canal at all. You can put a few drops of hydrogen peroxide, mineral oil or a pet ear cleaning solution on the end of a cotton swab. Gently wipe the outer ear, avoiding the ear canal.

Nails

The final area for grooming is the nails. Ferrets in the wild would wear down their nails in their daily pursuits over rough ground and in the process of tearing apart their prey. However, our pampered pets don't have these opportunities and in addition are exposed to surfaces that can catch and tear their nails, such as synthetic carpeting or upholstery. Pet ferrets kept outdoors with direct access to the ground often do not need routine nail trimming.

Ferret nails should be trimmed as needed. For some ferrets that might be every four weeks, for others it might be every eight weeks. Have an experienced person show you the nail trimming technique before you try it for the first time. The nails have a visible blood supply at the base that is called the quick. It is easy to see the quick, which is pink, in ferrets because their nails are not pigmented. The area of the quick also contains nerve tissue. Avoid cutting into this area or the nail will bleed and the trim will be

painful. You can use human flat nail trimmers or cat or small dog nail trimmers. Make sure the trimmers are sharp so they cut the nail cleanly and don't shred or tear it.

One trick you can use to make sure you are not cutting the quick is to press down on the nail with the clippers but don't cut the nail, just apply mild pressure to see if you get a reaction from the ferret. If you are over the quick he will pull his foot away or he will move his head. If there is no response then it is okay to cut. Have styptic powder available in case you accidentally cut into the quick. This powder can be obtained from any pet store and many veterinary clinics.

You can hold the ferret in the manner described for ear cleaning. Another fantastic and more fun way to trim nails is to place your ferret on his back in your lap with his head closest to you. Place a sticky or oily treat (hairball laxative or fatty acid supplement, or maybe some meat baby food) on the fur between his hind legs. Gently direct his head to where the treat is and while he is licking it off his tummy, you can trim the nails with no assistance.