

Ferrets are lively animals that make very amusing pets. They are part of the mustelid family, along with minks, martins, weasels, badgers, otters and wolverines. As part of this family, they have a persistent odor to their skin.

Most ferrets in the United States come from a few commercial operations that routinely spay or neuter and descent ferrets before they arrive at the pet store. Despite being “descented,” removing anal glands, ferrets normally secrete oils from their skin that have a distinct “ferret odor.” This can be controlled with bathing every few weeks, but should not be more frequent because their skin can become dry and itchy. Make sure the odor is not offensive to you before you purchase one.

Most commercially raised ferrets arrive at the pet store having had one canine distemper vaccination. Ferrets are extremely susceptible to disease caused by canine distemper virus. It is strongly recommended that ferrets have a full vaccine series. This means giving a ferret distemper vaccine every 3-4 weeks up to the age of 4 months.

At 4 months of age, they should also receive a rabies vaccine. Similar to cats and dogs, vaccinations should then be repeated yearly. Other preventative health measures include routine fecal exams and blood work, especially as your ferret ages.

Ferrets are very curious animals. This makes them fun to play with and watch. It also means they need to be closely supervised.

A cage is recommended as a place to eat and nap, but also as a safe place for the ferret to be housed when no one is home. Not only will ferrets try to eat many things they should not, such as pencil erasers, candy wrappers, eyes off of toys, they will also try to get into places they should not go.

The shape of their long, tubular bodies allows them to squeeze into small spaces, such as recliners or under refrigerators. Serious injury can occur while they are in these locations. Keeping a close eye on them and “ferret proofing” the intended area of play can go a long way in keeping your ferret safe and happy.

One of the common issues that arises with a new ferret owner is litter box training. Ferrets like to urinate and defecate in corners. This is another reason it is not a good idea to let ferrets, especially new ferrets, have unsupervised time in the house.

A high sided, corner litter box is an easy way to make your ferret feel comfortable and encourage use of the litter box. If your ferret already has a preferred location for urination and defecation simply place the litter box with some stool in it, in the preferred location. This is often enough to get the ferret to use the box. Just be aware that if the litter box is too far away, i.e. in the next room, even the best trained ferret may decide that a corner of the room will work just fine.

Ferrets are carnivores and should be fed as such. Brand name ferret foods or kitten and puppy foods are acceptable diets. Although many ferrets seem to love sweets and foods that are high in carbohydrates, they are sugar intolerant and should not be offered these items.

Ferrets in the United States have a high incidence of a disease called insulinoma. This tumor formation in the pancreas causes an over production of insulin. While feeding sugary foods is not the sole cause of this disease, sugary foods are thought to contribute to insulinoma development and, if an insulinoma is present, makes management more difficult.

As with any other kind of animal, ferrets can get sick. Unfortunately, this includes a high incidence of cancers. The three most common tumors are lymphoma (cancer of the lymph nodes), insulinoma (pancreas cancer), and adrenal gland disease.

Lymphoma varies in location and can affect both young and old ferrets. Insulinomas generally affect middle aged to older ferrets and can manifest as intermittent weakness and seizures. Adrenal disease in ferrets usually presents by 4-6 years of age. Signs include wide spread hair loss and a pot bellied appearance with vulvar swelling in females and inability to urinate in male ferrets.

It is recommended that ferrets be seen by their veterinarian on an annual basis to help monitor for signs of diseases. With preventative care and prompt medical attention for ongoing problems, you can help your ferret live a full and happy life of 7-10 years.

This column is provided by the faculty of the OSU Boren Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital.

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