

INTRODUCTION

Ferrets are domesticated mammals from the weasel or *Mustela* family. Domestication of ferrets began approximately 2500 years ago when ferrets were primarily used to hunt rabbits. Today ferrets are mostly kept as pets, and have a lifespan around 6-8 years. Most ferrets come from large producers and are already spayed and neutered when they arrive at the pet store; however, some can be obtained from private breeders. Ferrets are actually illegal to keep as pets in some states, such as California and Hawaii.

DIET

In the wild, ferrets are strict carnivores and eat whole prey. Pet and research ferrets have traditionally been fed high protein commercial ferrets diets. However, there have been many attempts to identify a captive diet that will result in ideal health and help prevent common ferret disease conditions. There is currently no consensus on the optimal commercial diet at this time.

We currently recommend:

- Commercial ferret diets containing no sugar, made primarily from meat and with as little grain or vegetable protein as possible.
- Treats should be meat based and not contain sugar or grains

While the following alternatives have been proposed, these diets introduce the risk of food borne illness both to ferrets and people handling the diets. For this reasons, these should be used with extreme care, if at all:

- Whole prey, such as mice, rats or chicks
- Raw diets

RECOMMENDED VETERINARY CARE

- Annual exams every 6 months for ferrets over the age of 4. The incidence of common ferret illnesses rises in ferrets over the age of 3.
- Yearly vaccination for canine distemper virus and rabies virus. Rabies vaccine is required for all ferrets in the state of Indiana.
- Nail trims as needed, if unable to perform at home.
- Common signs of illness include soft stool or diarrhea, respiratory signs, hind limb weakness or lethargy, and hair loss.

HOUSING

- A suggested minimum cage size is 36" x 24" x 24" for a single ferret; however, we recommend having the largest size cage you can accommodate.
- Ferrets are social and should be kept in pairs or groups if possible.
- Ferrets can be litter box trained and prefer to use corners of the cage.
 - Use paper based litter.
 - Larger enclosures require more than one litter box.
- Provide hammocks, tunnels, and/or sleeping sacks in the cage or during play time.
- Use water bottles and/or heavy bowls that cannot be tipped over for food and water.