



Ferret Health Care

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Clermont Animal Hospital, Inc.
 1404 Old State Route 74
 Batavia, Ohio 45103
 513-732-1730



Vaccinations for Your Ferret

*Vaccinations are shots given to your pets that will protect them from getting diseases. Many of the vaccinations require one or more **booster vaccinations**, which are shots that renew the effectiveness of the original vaccine. It is very important to get the vaccinations and booster shots on schedule to keep your ferret healthy. The information below describes what type of vaccinations your ferret needs and when he or she will need them.*

When should my ferret be vaccinated?

To keep your ferret healthy, Clermont Animal Hospital recommends that the first temporary vaccination be given when your ferret is 5 - 6 weeks old. Often this first vaccination is given by the breeder or at the pet store. This vaccine is repeated at 8 weeks, and then booster vaccinations are given every three to four weeks until your ferret is 4 months old.

Ferrets are very susceptible to both the canine and feline (Panleukopenia) forms of distemper. While dogs and cats can survive these diseases with proper care, ferrets rarely recover if they contract either form of distemper. Rabies vaccination is required by law annually for all ferrets (as opposed to every three years as in cats and dogs). For these reasons, it is very important to keep your ferret up-to-date on vaccinations.

Most breeders or pet stores give at least one set of vaccinations while the ferret is in their care. For this reason, it is important to bring any records you received with your ferret so that we can give your ferret the vaccinations at the appropriate time. A typical vaccination protocol is provided below to give you a general guideline of the ages that your ferret will need vaccinations:

| | |
|----------|---|
| 6 weeks | Canine Distemper, Panleukopenia |
| 8 weeks | Canine Distemper, Panleukopenia |
| 12 weeks | Canine Distemper, Panleukopenia |
| 16 weeks | Canine Distemper, Panleukopenia, Rabies |
| Annually | Canine Distemper, Panleukopenia, Rabies |

Can my ferret have reactions to vaccines?

Adverse vaccine reactions are more common in ferrets than in most other species of animals. **Ferrets must be given vaccinations that are specifically designed for ferrets or death can occur.** Because of this, Clermont Animal Hospital has very carefully chosen the vaccination used in ferrets to provide the best coverage with the fewest reactions. While some veterinary hospitals use vaccine protocols that require premedication with Benadryl® or require that vaccinations be given on separate visits, this is not typically necessary with the vaccines we use. However, it is still important to monitor your ferret closely following vaccinations.

Common Reactions

- Low-grade fever
- Lethargy
- Lack of appetite

Most of the time the reaction begins four to 12 hours after the vaccination is given and subsides within 24 - 72 hours. **If your ferret is exhibiting signs for more than three days, it is important that you contact our hospital.**

Site Reactions

Another common reaction is the appearance of a bump or swelling at the injection site. Most of the time these swellings are due to local immune reaction and are not a medical concern. In rare cases, an infection may occur at the vaccination site, causing a small abscess to form. If you notice a vaccination site reaction, please bring it to the attention of our veterinarians so that we can examine the area.

Allergic Reactions

Allergic reactions to vaccinations are uncommon but can occur. Ferrets experiencing an allergic reaction may have a swollen face or swollen eyes. Hives are also a sign of allergic vaccine reaction. In the most extreme cases, breathing difficulty can result. **If your ferret exhibits any of these signs, please contact us immediately. Emergency treatment may be necessary.** If a vaccine reaction occurs, we will try to determine which vaccine was responsible and discuss options for future vaccinations.

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Ferret Parasites

Parasites are living beings such as worms or insects that live on or inside your pet. They usually feed upon your pet, which can cause your ferret to be uncomfortable, malnourished or even to die.

Intestinal Parasites

Ferrets do not tend to get worms like dogs and cats do, however, young ferrets are very susceptible to **coccidia**. This is a microscopic parasite that lives in the intestines and causes decreased appetite, diarrhea, and occasionally can cause bloody stools. However, some ferrets with parasites do not show these symptoms. For this reason, at least two separate fecal examinations should be performed on young ferrets. Please bring a small amount of stool (feces) with you when you bring your ferret for vaccinations. If you have several ferrets from the same litter, only one stool sample is needed.

Heartworms

Heartworms are a deadly disease in ferrets. While heartworm infestation is primarily a disease of dogs, it does occasionally affect ferrets.

Larval stages of these worms are spread by the mosquito from an infected dog to your ferret. Because of this, we recommend that **ferrets who spend significant amounts of time outdoors are treated monthly with heartworm preventive**. We carry Advantage Multi® for cats. This product is safe to use in ferrets and will both prevent heartworms and kill fleas. This is a monthly topical (skin) application.

Fleas

While fleas prefer dogs and cats to ferrets, it is possible for ferrets to be affected in a household with a significant flea infestation. In general, no routine prevention should be necessary for ferrets if all other animals in the household are treated routinely with flea preventative. However, during an outbreak, it may be necessary to also treat the ferret. There are no flea products specifically approved for use in ferrets. Many of the kitten products can be used safely, but it important to check with one of our veterinarians to make sure that you are dosing your ferret safely and accurately.

Treatment

Clermont Animal Hospital offers a variety of products for flea control. The products we carry are much more effective than anything you can buy from a pet store or grocery store. Most products you get from a pet or grocery store only treat fleas in the adult stage. It is important to remember that only 5 percent of the fleas are in the adult stage, and immature fleas will survive and develop into adults even when these flea treatments are used. For every five adult flea, there may be close to 100 immature fleas. Not all life stages can be killed, so once your ferret is infested with fleas, it may take several months or more to totally eliminate the problem.

Once fleas have been spotted, it is necessary to treat them aggressively for several months in a row to ensure that all immature fleas have been eliminated. Our staff can help you chose the products that will be most effective in eliminating the fleas through treatment of your pet and the environment. Ask us about the most up-to-date products in this area.



Ferret Care Basics

Nutrition

Ferrets are strict carnivores. This means that they require a diet high in fat and animal protein but low in carbohydrates and fiber. Dry kibble diets are too high in grains (carbohydrates) and should not make up more than 50% of the diet. Canned ferret food or a premium quality growth formula puppy food can make up the other 50%. Alternatively, ferrets can be fed whole-animal prey such as mice, small rats, and chicks. A feline vitamin can be used to ensure complete nutrition, especially in growing ferrets.

While your ferret may crave sweets, these should not be given, even as snacks or treats. Instead we recommend using liver or fish cat treats or small pieces of fresh meat for snacks and treats. Meat-only human baby foods are also an acceptable compliment to you ferret's diet. If fruits and/or vegetables are given at all, they should be strictly limited to 1tsp. per day.

Ferret-Proofing

It is necessary to ferret-proof your ferret's environment with the same diligence and attention to detail with which you would baby-proof a house for a curious toddler. All holes and openings larger than a quarter must be closed off or made otherwise inaccessible to prevent "escape" into the outdoors or into inaccessible areas. Ferrets can squeeze through incredibly tiny openings and can create opening by chewing, so be sure to survey their environment regularly.

Ferrets are burrowing animals. They like to burrow into furniture, under blankets, and into any tight secure place. Unfortunately, many ferrets chew as they burrow and often ingest the material. They are particularly fond of chewing foam, fibers, and rubbery substances. The most common serious health problem seen in ferrets under the age of two is foreign body ingestion. This can be life-threatening and requires expensive surgical procedures and extensive recovery. For this reason, ferrets should not be left unattended in a room with upholstered furniture, bedding, foam, etc.

Ferrets are predators by nature. They love squeak toys because it excites their prey drive; however, ferrets will treat these toys as "prey" and try to "kill" the toy. This often results in the ferret ingesting part of the toy, which can create an intestinal blockage. For this reason, all plastic, foam, and soft rubber toys should only be used under constant supervision and should never be left in the ferret's enclosure. If a toy is missing pieces, it should be saved to show the veterinarian, and the ferret should be closely observed for any signs of lethargy, vomiting, decreased appetite, weight loss, etc. In most cases, toy ingestion presents with very vague signs and can have signs that may seem completely unrelated such as dragging the hind legs. If your ferret becomes ill, always mention the chewed up toy, even if the toy was chewed weeks or months ago. In some cases, the observed health problems have a delayed onset.

Litter Box Training

Ferrets can be litter box trained, but few of them are as consistent as a cat about using a litter box even with good training. It is important to remember that ferrets have a short digestive tract and frequents stools. This means that they have frequent bowl movements with short advanced warning. It may be necessary to place multiple litter boxes around a room or a large enclosure so that one is always convenient to use. Clay litter is not recommended as ferrets can ingest it. Compacted pine or paper litters are preferred.



Common Ferret Health Problems

Diarrhea

Common Causes

- Intestinal parasites
- Diet changes
- Dietary indiscretion (your ferret eats something abnormal)
- Infectious disease

How serious is diarrhea? The consistency of the stool can range from just slightly softer than normal to very watery. If your ferret has watery diarrhea, dehydration may be a concern. **Any ferret with watery diarrhea should be examined as soon as possible.**

In less severe cases, your ferret should be examined if any of the following apply:

1. Your ferret is also vomiting (vomiting is rare in ferrets and always serious)
2. Your ferret is lethargic or is not eating
3. Diarrhea lasts for more than 24 hours
4. Blood is seen in the stool.

Vomiting

Common Causes

- Stomach or intestinal foreign body (your ferret eats something that gets “stuck”)
- Lymphoma (a cancer seen most commonly in ferrets older than four years)
- *Helicobacter mustelae* (a bacterial infection that causes stomach ulcers)

Vomiting in ferrets is almost always a sign of a serious problem. If your ferret vomits, seek veterinary attention as soon as possible.

Low Blood Sugar

Common Causes

- Very young ferrets that are not eating
- Insulinoma (a tumor of the pancreas—most common in ferrets older than four years)

Signs of Low Blood Sugar

- Severe lethargy with a “glazed eye” appearance
- Weakness and/or Collapse
- Tremors
- Seizures
- Pawing at the mouth
- Dragging the hind legs

What can you do if you suspect low blood sugar?

Low blood sugar is an emergency situation that can lead to death if not corrected. If you suspect low blood sugar in your ferret, immediately rub Nutrical® (available through Clermont Animal Hospital), honey, or Karo® syrup on his or her gums and call us as soon as possible. Most cases need to be treated with IV dextrose (sugar) fluids.

Hair Loss

Common Causes

- Adrenal gland tumor (a cancer seen most commonly in ferrets older than four years)
- Fleas or other external parasites
- Skin infection

Hair loss is rarely an emergency situation, but it is almost always a sign of a medical problem. Hair loss related to an adrenal gland tumor often starts out as sparse hair over the tail. Over time, the hair loss progresses until the ferret is practically naked. It is very uncommon for anything else to cause this pattern of hair loss in a ferret. For this reason, it is recommended that ferrets with this type of hair loss have an exploratory surgery to look for an adrenal gland tumor.

Dental Tartar

Just as dogs and cats can have tartar build-up on their teeth, ferrets can too. It is a good idea to check your ferret's teeth regularly for tartar build-up. Our veterinarians will also check the teeth as part of the routine annual examination. If the tartar build-up is above the level of the gum or is causing gingivitis (red inflamed gums), a dental cleaning is necessary. Ferrets need to be anesthetized for this procedure and should have pre-anesthetic blood testing to be sure that they are in good health.

Cancer

Lymphoma

Lymphoma is a cancer of the lymph nodes and lymph system. It can present as swollen, hard lymph nodes throughout the ferrets body, or as gastrointestinal (GI) signs if it is present in the lining of the intestines. Because this cancer is throughout the body, it cannot be treated surgically. Chemotherapy is an option, or medications can be used to slow the spread and make the ferret more comfortable.

Adrenal Gland Tumor

Hair loss is the most common sign of this tumor. Usually beginning in late winter or early spring, it is initially seen as a thinning of the coat and/or tail baldness. If the tumor is left untreated, the hair loss can progress until the ferret is almost entirely bald. Other signs include itchy reddened skin, particularly on the back, enlarged vulva (females), and difficulty urinating due to prostatic enlargement (males). Surgical removal of the tumor is usually curative; however, it is possible for the same tumor to develop in the other adrenal gland or for tumor metastases to cause recurrent signs.

Insulinoma

This is a tumor of the part of the pancreas that produces insulin. This tumor causes too much insulin production which lowers the blood sugar (see signs discussed in the "Low Blood Sugar" section above). In addition to the signs associated with low blood sugar, excessive salivation, nausea, and weight loss may also be noted. While surgical removal is not usually curative, it can temporarily relieve the signs of the disease and prolong the life expectancy of the ferret. Once symptoms return, medical management is recommended to keep the tumor under control.

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