

# FERRET CARE SHEET

IMPORTANT - these 3 things are essential to know about keeping your ferret alive!



1. **Female ferrets need to be de-sexed** (or brought out of season by one of the other available methods) once they come into season. If they are not de-sexed, they can die from a condition called aplastic anemia. See *De-sexing* section for further information.
2. **Heatstroke.** Ferrets have thick fur and cannot sweat or pant, so do not cope well with temperatures above the mid 20s – their living area needs to be kept cool over the warmer months. Heatstroke kills ferrets every Summer in Australia. Air-conditioning is the easiest and most reliable way to keep them cool and prevent heatstroke, but access to cool areas of the house (such as the tiled laundry), or underground quarters can also be effective.
3. **Ferret-proofing.** Any area your ferret has access to – whether it is for 5 minutes or 24 hours a day – needs to be ferret-proofed. This means blocking any means of escapes (holes in the wall/floor, inside cupboards, open doors/windows, etc) & injury (inside appliances before use, inside recliners, etc). See *Living Area* section for further information.

## Legalities

Ferrets are illegal to keep in Queensland and the Northern Territory! They are legal pets in every other state & territory of Australia. A licence is needed in the ACT.

## Basics

Ferrets (*Mustela furo*) are a small domesticated carnivore and a member of the Mustelid family, which includes otters, stoats & weasels. They aren't rodents. They are the domesticated form of an animal called a polecat, which is native to Europe & the UK.

Because they are domesticated, they are dependent on humans for their survival, and would not survive if released into the wild. Despite ferrets having been in Australia for over 100 years, there has never been a recorded case of them surviving in the wild.

A group of ferrets is called a "business", a male ferret is a "hob", a female ferret is a "jill", a baby ferret is a "kit". The ferret's lifespan in Australia is approximately 7-12 years. Males are usually much bigger than females.

There are 5 main colours available: sable (dark brown), chocolate (light brown), black-eyed white (white fur with black eyes), silvermitt (white bib on necks & feet) and albino (white fur with red eyes).

Sable is the most common colour. White ferrets often appear a gold or orange colour (especially when they are not desexed) due to the production of oil in their skin.

## Behaviour

Ask someone if they have even seen a ferret and they will usually reply with something about ferrets being vicious – this reputation stems from the past when ferrets were kept as working animals in cages in the backyard & rarely handled. Ferrets are just like every other animal - if they are not given a suitable living environment, and are not handled, they will usually become antisocial.

When their needs are met and they are kept as part of the family, they make fantastic pets. They are intelligent, quiet, active & playful. Some are affectionate, others are more independent. They are not for everyone though – young children can often be overwhelmed by their enthusiastic play & play-nipping, and the household needs to understand that the area where the ferret lives needs to be kept ferret-proof to stop them escaping.

They get along well with most cats & dogs (depending on the dog's breed/personality) but not animals which would be their natural prey—birds, guinea pigs, mice & rats.

Baby ferrets (kits) need to be nip-trained, as they don't understand that humans have much more fragile skin than their ferret siblings. Positive reinforcement (praise & treats) when they are being gentle is a good idea. If they play too roughly, say "gentle" firmly, spray them with a water bottle (not on jetstream), or put something like butter on your fingers and toes to encourage them to lick not nip. Punishment (hitting, flicking, etc) can lead to behavioural problems so is best avoided.

Ideally kits should stay with their mum & siblings until around 10-12 weeks of age. Kits who have been removed from their mother & siblings too young can develop behavioural problems (especially when their new home is an "only ferret" home).

Adult ferrets who bite have either not been properly nip trained when they were young (so are playing too roughly and don't realise they are hurting), have a behavioural / medical problem, or have been mistreated.

## De-sexing

Almost all pet ferrets today are de-sexed – this virtually eliminates their body odour (especially the males!), allows them to live with other ferrets without fights, prevents a medical condition which can kill female ferrets (aplastic anemia), and prevents adding to the ferret population with unwanted pregnancies.

Male ferrets can be de-sexed once their testes have descended and can be easily felt (you will be able to feel 2 lumps between their legs about the size of peas).

Female ferrets should be de-sexed once they reach sexual maturity and come into season - this is usually at about 6 months of age, but can be earlier. De-sexing is a permanent solution. Other options are to mate her (only recommended for experienced owners who have had ferrets for several years, and for ferrets at least 2 years old), or to get an artificial hormone shot from a ferret-knowledgeable vet – both of these are temporary solutions.

You will know when she has come into season as her vulva will swell to the size of a raisin. If she is not brought out of season by being de-sexed (or one of the other methods), **she may die** from aplastic anemia.

De-sexing reduces the production of oil from the skin (which is why they smell less after desexing) & reduces the production of hormones within the body (which is why their behaviour changes).

The ferret's anal glands are located either side of their anus and are released (usually only in emergencies) when a ferret is alarmed. The smell is quite strong, but quickly dissipates. De-scenting is a surgery where these anal glands are removed – it was once thought that this would reduce their body odour but we now know it has no effect on that (de-sexing reduces body odour, not de-scenting). De-scenting is not routinely performed in Australia, and is not recommended unless for medical reasons.

## Toilet Training

Ferrets go to the toilet in corners by instinct and can be trained to use a litter tray just like a cat. Unlike a cat they usually need a tray in each area/room they have access to. If you see them about to go to the toilet outside a tray, quickly pick them up and place them in the tray. Use positive reinforcement (praise & treats) when they use the tray, never negative reinforcement (hitting, flicking ,etc). Expect a few accidents outside the trays from time to time, as not all ferrets are 100% accurate.

Use a tray with a low front edge if possible, and newspaper or paper pellet type litters are good (avoid silicon or clay type litters). Change the trays daily, and preferably place a tray opposite their sleeping area as they usually go to the toilet immediately after waking.

## Grooming

Ferrets will groom themselves like a cat. They don't need to be washed unless for a specific reason (such as being covered in mud!), and washing too often can actually cause the skin to over-produce oil and make them smell more.

Ferrets don't need to be brushed, but can be if they enjoy it. Ferrets claws are non-retractable and need to be clipped every couple of weeks. Ears don't usually need cleaning, but can be cleaned with liquid ear cleaner when required.

## Health

Dental disease (also called periodontal disease) is probably the most common disease in pet ferrets and not only affects the mouth but also the rest of the body (including organs) – see Diet section for prevention.

Ferrets can contract canine distemper (and it is almost always fatal), so should be vaccinated against this. They are also susceptible to parasites including fleas, ear mites, sarcoptic mange & ticks. Heartworm preventative should be used as there is no treatment for heartworm infection in ferrets.



They can catch influenza (the "flu") from humans and vice versa, but cannot catch the "common cold".

Ferrets can go downhill very quickly when ill, so ferret owners need to be quick to notice any symptoms and act immediately. Be sure to use a ferret-knowledgeable vet, as many vets are not trained to recognise the unique problems that ferrets often present, nor have experience with surgery or treatment of the ferret.

## Diet

Fresh water should be available at all times. Use a large heavy bowl so they cannot tip it over.

Ferrets are carnivores, which means they are designed to eat whole animals such as rabbits, birds & mice. Ideally, owners should feed these foods – a variety of whole prey such as mice, chicks, quail, and so on (not live, usually bought frozen from reptile pet shops, butchers or supermarkets).

This is not to everybody's liking however, so a close second best is a variety of small raw, meaty bones & occasional organs. Chicken necks/wings, chicken frames (cut up), rabbit, quail, etc.

This diet will provide them with the nutrients they need, as well as being whole so the ferret has to tear & crunch through the food – preventing dental disease. Dried food/biscuits, canned food, mince, chopped up meat, fruit, vegetables, dairy & human junk food are unhealthy for ferrets.

## Living Area

Ferrets are similar to a small dog in size & activity level, so should be given a living area large enough to run across – a room or two of your house as a minimum. Ferrets are crepuscular which means their main periods of activity are at dawn & dusk (like a deer), however they will wake for short periods of activity every few hours throughout the day & night.

For this reason, small living areas (cages, rabbit hutches, etc) are not beneficial to ferrets, as a small living space does not allow the ferret to run, play, explore & exercise at will. Even if confined "only" at night, this usually equates to about half of their time spent in an area too small to run, and as a result they will become much more inactive (at best) or develop behavioural problems (at worst).



Ferrets are very curious animals and will follow their nose anywhere it takes them. Their small, long bodies are perfect for fitting through very small gaps & down pipes, so they are known as escape artists.

**Ferret-proofing any area they have access to is essential** – whether they are in that area for 5 minutes or 24 hours a day - to prevent escapes & injuries, and also make the housekeeping easier for you. Decide which rooms the ferret will or won't have access to (preferably ones with hard flooring) and check for any holes in walls, floors, cupboards, etc. Door barriers (60-70cm high) can be used to keep ferrets in or out of certain rooms while allowing you to step over the barrier easily.

Ensure windows are kept closed or ferret cannot climb up to them, and doors are not left open. Check appliances before using them, shake out your laundry before washing it, check blankets before sitting on them, move recliners to a room the ferrets can't access. Block hard-to-access spots under and behind furniture & appliances so they can't sleep, stash food or go to the toilet there (otherwise you won't be able to reach them or clean it out).

Part (or all) of your yard can be ferret-proofed so the ferret can enjoy digging, running through grass, rain & real sunlight. Ferrets can also be walked with a harness & lead in areas such as the local park or beach - watch out for dogs & magpies and preferably go in the cool of the evening.

## Sleeping Area

Ferrets naturally sleep in dark dens, so they appreciate a dark, cozy sleeping box. A box (with lid) with a hole cut into the side is perfect for this – dark coloured plastic storage crates, or cardboard boxes work well. Alternatively place some bedding inside a cupboard, drawers or other piece of furniture.

Specialised ferret bedding (hammocks, blankets, etc) can be purchased from many places, or old clothing or towels are also good. Avoid wood shavings/chips.