

a care guide for your

# Ferret

(*Mustela putorius furo*)



Congratulations! You are bringing a ferret into your home. Here is what you need to know and expect from your new fuzzy family member.

## Behavior

Ferrets are wacky little creatures. They're curious, mischievous and playful when they're awake, but they sleep most of the day. Ferrets are usually only awake for about four hours a day, but, during those hours, they want to be out and about. They love to chase each other, or you, around the room, through tubes and under blankets. They may do a "war dance" — open their mouths and jump backward — a signal that they want to play. They love to steal and stash things, especially socks or things with interesting textures.

Your ferret needs at least a couple of hours a day out of its cage to run around and explore. Most ferrets can entertain themselves, especially if they have a ferret friend to run around with and a toy or two. Having a ferret run around the room is a ton of fun, but remember — they are mischievous little critters. If their heads can fit through a gap, they can go through it, which can be dangerous (e.g., getting stuck behind the fridge or in a ventilation shaft). If they steal something they shouldn't have (e.g., shoes, the remote control, your keys, a bag of treats), you'll have to put it somewhere they can't reach it.

## Socialization

Ferrets can easily learn to be playmates with humans. To pick up your ferret, hold him under the armpits. You can scoop him like a baby, or just let him hang against you. If he is not used to being handled, he might bite. If this happens, don't immediately set him down (or he'll learn that biting is how he asks to get down).

With regular handling and communication, your ferret should eventually learn not to bite.



## The Basics



**LIFESPAN**  
5 to 8 years



**DIET**  
mix of ferret kibble,  
small amounts of plain  
meat



**HABITAT**  
multilevel cage,  
litter box, sleep area



**EXERCISE**  
outside the cage to  
run and explore



**CLIMATE**  
60°F-75°F



**GROOMING**  
nail trimming, ear and  
teeth cleaning

## Diet

Ferrets should always have food and water available. They can drink water from bowls or bottles. Different ferrets do better with different water sources, so try both with yours. For food, it is good to feed a mix of at least two to three different ferret kibbles. Cat food is similar to ferret food but often has less of certain nutrients (like taurine) that are important for ferrets. It's best to stick to ferret food, since it was designed to meet ferrets' dietary needs.



Ferrets are picky eaters, and it can be hard to switch them to a new food. Mixing different kibbles is important in case one of them switches to a new recipe your ferret does not like or goes out of stock. That way, your ferret does not have to abruptly change to an unfamiliar food that he will not eat for the first few days. When introducing a new food, mix a small amount of it in with the food he was already eating, gradually increasing the amount as he gets used to it.

For treats, there are many commercial ferret treat brands. Do not give your ferret anything high in sugar, and never give chocolate or anything with artificial sweeteners. Ferrets are carnivores and cannot digest plant fiber, so avoid most human foods. Some ferrets like meaty treats. Plain chicken, jerky or other meats are OK in small amounts if your ferret is interested.

## Lifespan

Ferrets typically live five to eight years.

## Habitat

Ferrets need a large enough cage that they can have their food/water, litter box and bedding in separate areas. Multilevel cages are best. A good rule of thumb is to use a cage at least 3 feet by 2 feet by 2 feet.

Ferrets should have a litter box and multiple places they can sleep in their cage. For bedding, pillowcases make good cage-floor covers. Ferrets love to sleep in hammocks, and most ferrets like fleece blankets or unfinished fleece from the craft store. Some ferrets will try to eat fleece, though, in which case they need to be switched to bed sheets or flannel. Their bedding should be washed about once a week, or anytime they poop or pee on it. It's good to regularly wipe down the cage floors with very diluted bleach water to clean up any unnoticed accidents and to sweep away any kibble crumbs.

Ferrets can use wood, paper pellets or newspaper in their litter boxes. Avoid clay kitty litter, since ferrets will dig around in it and get it stuck in their lungs. Your ferret should be able to comfortably fit in the box without curling up. You should expect to scoop the litter box daily.

## Temperature and humidity

Ferrets do best between 60–75 degrees F. They cannot sweat, so hot temperatures and/or high humidity are very dangerous for them. Make sure to keep your ferret's habitat away from windows and direct drafts.

## Grooming

Ferrets need to have their nails, ears, and teeth groomed, ideally every two weeks. Although we provide guidance below, we suggest watching online videos to learn how to groom your ferret.

For nail trims, you can use human or ferret nail clippers. It's easiest to distract them with an oil treat while you do this. A few drops of salmon oil or commercial ferret treat oil on their bellies will keep them distracted while you trim. Always clip so the nail is getting squished side-to-side, rather than up-and-down so as to avoid breaking the nail, which can be painful. Never clip into the pink "quick" of the toenail, only trim off the white ends. You will know if you have clipped too short, because your ferret will flinch and bleed. Should that happen, you will need to use cornstarch or a styptic powder to stop the bleeding. Nails that are too long can hurt your ferret when he walks and can get caught in things.

For ear and teeth cleaning, you will need to scruff your ferret. To do this, get a firm grip on the extra skin on the back of his neck.

For ear cleaning, use a cotton swab and swoop around the back of your ferret's ear. Never clean toward his face or you could damage his hearing. Dark brown earwax is normal and should go away after three to five swabs. Use a clean swab every time.

For teeth cleaning, use a cotton swab dipped in children's fluoride rinse. Rub your ferret's gums (they may bleed slightly if they are not used to this), and rub as many surfaces of his teeth as you can.

## Toys

Ferrets will play with just about anything. They are happy with paper bags and cardboard boxes of all sizes. They love tubes. Some ferrets also love cat toys and tennis balls.

Avoid rubber or foam toys. Ferrets can rip pieces off and eat them, which can cause serious internal blockages. If you see your ferret chewing pieces off any toy, you should take it away from him to avoid health problems.

## Supplies needed

- Habitat: large cage (at least 3 feet by 2 feet by 2 feet) with at least two floors
- Litter box with wood or paper pellets
- Food and water bowls
- Water bottle
- Fleece bedding and hammock
- Ferret food
- Toys (variety, no rubber or foam)
- Nail trimmers
- Children's fluoride rinse

## References

- Washington Ferret Rescue and Shelter (<https://www.washingtonferret.org/faq.htm>)
- Ferret Ownership: In-Depth (<https://www.drsfostersmith.com/pic/article.cfm?articleid=1850>)



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