

Adopting a Ferret

Ferrets are entertaining animals that make excellent pets. They are highly intelligent, playful, social, and affectionate. Here are a few fun facts and considerations before adopting a ferret:

- When well-cared for, ferrets typically live between 8-10 years.
- They are very social and require companionship when people are not around them. Ferrets do best in pairs or groups.
- Ferrets are very active and inquisitive. **It is very important to give them several hours of playtime outside of their cage every day.**
- They can bite if handled roughly, so they may not be suitable for families with younger children.
- Ferrets are mischievous. They will try to escape at every opportunity, so it is important to [ferret-proof your home](#) and keep doors closed at all times.
- Ferrets can be ferocious and territorial around other animals. Oftentimes other pets such as cats and dogs will avoid interacting with them. *ALL inter-species interactions should ALWAYS be monitored and supervised.*
- Ferrets are fragrant! They have a signature musky smell that is likely to be present in your home despite baths or cleaning.
- They can be very affectionate, and will often climb inside your sweater and cuddle.
- **Ferrets are not low-maintenance pets.** They require lots of enrichment, special diets, frequent feedings, and large cages that must be cleaned often.



Ferret Supplies Checklist – The Basics:

- Large, multi-level [ferret cage](#)
- Litter box and natural litter
- Soft bedding (such as fleece)
- [Enrichment items](#)
- [Ferret food and treats](#)
- Mountable food and water dishes



Feeding Your Ferret

Ferrets are obligate carnivores, meaning their diet must consist of meat proteins such as chicken, turkey, and beef. Look for a diet that is high in protein and fat but low in carbohydrates. **At HSCC, ferrets are fed 1/4 cup of [Marshall Premium Ferret Food](#) mornings and evenings, in addition to treats.** It is important to note that ferrets have a fast metabolism and need to eat 4-5 times per day, so they should always have access to kibble!

Ferret Food

There are several ferret-specific diets available. A high-quality [ferret chow](#) (available at most commercial pet stores) should be available at all times since ferrets graze throughout the day. **Make sure the food you choose contains at least 34% protein and less than 2% fiber, and that meat is the first ingredient on the list of ingredients on the back of the bag.** Change out any old food on a semi-regular basis. Make sure not to put too much food in their bowls at a time; this will only lead to stale food that you will ultimately have to throw away!

Treats

If you are looking for something special to give your furry friend, some options include: Commercial ferret treats, hard boiled/scrambled eggs, cooked unseasoned meats such as fish, chicken, turkey, baby food (no veggies), and freeze-dried 100% meat products. However, as with any treat, moderation is important. Always ask your veterinarian before adding any new foods to your ferret's diet!

Protip: DO NOT FEED fresh/dried fruits and veggies, peanut butter, dairy, or any other food with sugar. Ferrets are unable to digest complex carbs (sugars, grains, dairy, etc.)!

Supplements

If your ferret is eating a high-quality diet, nutritional supplements and extra vitamins shouldn't be necessary. In some cases, your veterinarian may recommend supplements for some ferret-specific needs. If you suspect that your ferret is having difficulty passing hairballs, there are a few hairball supplements that can help, including [Ferret Lax](#). See [Ferret Grooming & Health](#) for more about ferret hairball management.

Water

Fresh water should be available to your ferret at all times. Change water daily and keep water dishes clean. Since ferrets are very active, consider serving their water in a [mountable dish](#) (see right) or a heavy bowl that does not tip over easily.



Ferret Housing

Choosing a Ferret Cage

Providing safe and adequate housing for your ferret(s) is important for their safety! Large, multi-level housing complexes are available at many pet supply stores. Great cage brands include [Critter Nation](#) and [Ferret Nation](#) (see right).

At a minimum, your ferret cage should:

- Have multiple levels
- Be made of strong materials (ferrets love to chew!)
- Have solid bottoms (wire bottoms can cause foot sores and other injuries)
- Be large enough to comfortably accommodate the number of ferrets you have

Never use a single-level “small animal habitat” or fish aquarium as a ferret home!



Bedding

The cage floors and shelves should be lined with fleece and blankets. Ferrets do best with soft fabric bedding - it is easier for them to move around on, and it makes cleaning easier. Avoid terry cloth or any fabric that tears easily or has holes in it, as ferrets can often get stuck in the material when burrowing or nesting.

Litter Box

Ferrets can be litter box trained, so finding a small litter box made for cage corners (see right) is helpful. It is also a great idea to get a box that attaches to the cage since ferrets love to dig and may move the box. Natural litters such as [Yesterday's News](#) (made of recycled newspaper) are best to use. **DO NOT use clay clumping cat litter or wood shavings** as they can cause respiratory problems (and some ferrets like to try to eat clay litter which is very dangerous).



Protip: If your ferret is not using the box and choose a different place to go to the bathroom, move the box to their chosen location to encourage them to use it.

Food and Water Dishes

Food and water bowls that attach to the cage are the best choice, since ferrets will dig in them and may knock them over. Your local pet store or favorite online shop should carry [mountable dishes](#) intended for small animal enclosures.

Enrichment Items

Any ferret home should include plenty of enrichment items that will allow your ferret to engage their playful, curious, and cuddly nature. Great items to have include hammocks, tunnels, tubes, cat toys, and ball pits. See our handout on [Ferret Activity & Enrichment](#) for a full list of enrichment items and ideas to include in your ferret's cage.

Cleaning Your Ferret Enclosure

HSCC recommends doing a spot clean daily and a full clean at least twice a week. Below are a few tips for your cleaning routine.

Daily Spot Clean

- Clean the litter box (dump out, rinse/wipe, and add new litter)
- Shake out bedding and clean up any droppings and stale/uneaten food (it's okay to leave some ferret pellets, as long as they aren't too old)
- Remove any soiled bedding and replace with clean bedding
- Sweep or vacuum the cage to remove excess fur (most important during shedding season)
- Empty/refill water

Weekly Full Clean

- Daily spot clean items, in addition to the below
- Clean enrichment items and wash/replace all bedding and plush toys
- Sweep/vacuum the cage for fur and debris
- Wipe/scrub down surfaces with warm, soapy water
- Clean out water and food dishes



Ferret Enrichment & Activity

Enrichment

In order to keep your ferret active and engaged, be sure to include the following items in their enclosure:

- **Spots to hide and snuggle.** Ferrets love to burrow and be cozy! They love things like sleeping/snuggles sacks and piles of blankets.
- **Things to explore and lounge in.** Ferrets are very inquisitive. Fill your ferret's cage with hammocks, tubes, tunnels, PVC pipes, paper bags, and other things to climb for exploration and snuggling opportunities!
- **Toys!** Ferrets LOVE toys! A few great options include jingle balls and squeaky toys, wand toys, and crinkle sacks. Be sure to provide safe and durable toys (there are toys made specifically for ferrets but cat toys work just as well).
- **Interactive boxes and pits.** Ferrets love to dig around. You can make a DIY digging box by filling boxes with crumpled paper (they love the sound the paper makes when burrowing around in it), biodegradable packing peanuts, or plastic balls. Old shipping boxes or empty litter boxes work well.



Play Time

Ferrets are intelligent and curious creatures and providing daily exercise time outside of their cage is essential and will help keep your ferret happy and healthy. **It is very important to give them several hours of playtime outside of their cage daily.** See below for some ideas to help you and your ferret get the most out of playtime.

- Invent creative games to play with your ferret and provide them with lots of interactive toys. Remember, ferrets are very intelligent animals!
- Because of their playful nature, ferrets will often hide under (or in) furniture and will dart away when you try to catch them. To them, running around avoiding you is a fun game; to you, it can be frustrating. Focus on training them to do tricks to keep them mentally active, as well as training them to understand when playtime is over.
- Hold your ferret often and give them lots of physical affection! Ferrets are social animals and thrive with frequent interaction and bonding.
- Know where your ferret is at all times. Never let your ferret run around unsupervised.

Protip: You can hide treats throughout your ferret's enclosure or room they are playing in - this will encourage their natural foraging instincts!

Tips for Ferret-Proofing Your Home

Letting your ferret out of their habitat for playtime means you'll need to do some ferret-proofing. Try to have a ferret safe room for your ferret to play in. Make sure to ferret proof any room that your ferret will be playing in by following these basic steps:

- **Remove all harmful substances** (even from cabinets – yes, ferrets can open cabinets!), as well as wires and items small enough for them to choke on.
- Be sure to **block up any holes or cracks!** Ferrets can (and will!) squeeze through anything they can get their heads through. Take stock of any vents, furniture (such as couches or box springs with a fabric bottom), and appliances that may be tempting for your ferret to explore.
- **Block exits:** Due to their skeletons, ferrets have the ability to squeeze through tiny gaps. Ferrets are able to get under doors that have less than an inch gap. It is important that you 'block' any potential exits; otherwise, you'll spend hours searching for them.
- **Keep doors and windows closed.** While your ferret is out for playtime, keep the doors and windows closed to prevent escape attempts. Ferrets are known for being door-darters, and they are capable of tearing through window screens.
- For more tips, check out [this video from The Modern Ferret](#) about how to ferret-proof your home!

Ferrets are mischievous creatures so always supervise your ferret when they are out of their cage!



Ferret Handling 101

Ferrets are naturally very curious, inquisitive, and tend to be very friendly and willing to be handled. Once they get to know you, ferrets love human companionship and they can become very strongly bonded to their human owners. See below for tips and tricks for handling your pet ferret.

Approaching your ferret: Ferrets can be skittish, especially when they're still getting to know you. Avoid sudden movements, and make your presence known by making a sound. Especially when first bonding with your ferret, treats always help!

Petting your ferret: Ferrets love to be pet! They particularly like being stroked and tickled behind the ears. Ferrets are also known to love a gentle body scratch.

Holding your ferret: It may help to try this when your ferret is a little sleepy. Scoop them up and hold them close to your body – be sure to use your forearms and hands to support the mid-section and booty. You can use a blanket or a snuggle sack for added support, and some ferrets also enjoy being carried around in a [sling!](#)



Training: It's important to train your ferret as early on as possible. Things like potty training and accepting handling are similar to dog training (think positive reinforcement!). It requires patience and repetition, but ferrets are quick learners.

Biting: Ferrets are known to explore the world with their mouths, and this behavior should never be punished. A firm “no” is normally all it takes to stop the behavior.

Scruffing: *Do not scruff your ferret!* Scruffing is very uncomfortable for ferrets and, if done incorrectly, can cause injury. Ferrets should always be handled gently, and should never be picked up by their scruff.

For more tips about ferret handling and bonding, check out [The Modern Ferret!](#)

Ferret Grooming & Health

Grooming Basics

- **Nails.** Ferret nails grow quickly and can snag easily, so frequent trimming is important. Weekly trimmings are best, but it depends on how fast your ferret's nails grow.
- **Ears.** Ear cleaning can be done every 2-4 weeks as needed. Some ferrets produce more wax than others, so the length of time between ear cleanings will vary. Discuss cleaning with your vet, and use only ferret-appropriate ear cleaner.
- **Teeth.** You can brush your ferret's teeth, but *do not* use human toothpaste! Use pet-friendly toothpaste, which is safer and tastier for your ferret.
- **Bathing.** Ferrets tend to keep themselves clean. Limit baths to no more than 4 per year, as frequent bathing can cause their musky odor to increase and can dry out their skin. Shampoo formulated specifically for ferrets is recommended. You can also use baby shampoo.
- **Hair and hairballs.** Ferrets shed most in the spring and fall, and during this time are prone to hairballs. They can't cough up hairballs in the same way cats do, so the best way to help your ferret during shedding season is prevention: brush your ferret daily, keep the cage as fur-free as possible, and use a gentle ferret-safe hairball remedy such as [Ferret Lax](#). If hairballs do form, they can cause intestinal blockages. Signs of a blockage include reduced appetite, hind leg weakness, coughing, and vomiting; *if your ferret has any of these symptoms, take them to the vet right away!*



Ferret Vaccines, Health Concerns, and More

A yearly trip to the vet is always recommended for ferrets to ensure they are healthy and up to date on vaccines. **Ferrets are required by law to be vaccinated for rabies in the state of Vermont, and some vets may suggest a distemper vaccine as well.** Be sure to double check your new ferret's HSCC medical records to see if they received any vaccines. Ferrets require vaccines that are specifically approved for ferrets, so HSCC only vaccinates ferrets when appropriate supplies are available.

If your ferret is older than 4 years, it is very important to go to the vet annually if not biannually to ensure they are healthy, as **older ferrets are prone to Adrenal Disease.** For more on Adrenal Disease and the signs to look for, see the [Adrenal Disease in Ferrets](#) handout.

Adrenal Disease in Ferrets

What is Adrenal Disease?

Adrenal disease: *When one or both of the adrenal glands become enlarged as a result of the development of tumors or growths developing on the adrenal glands.*

Adrenal disease, also known as adrenocortical disease, is one of the most common diseases seen in domestic ferrets in the U.S. Ferrets are most likely to develop this disease when they are middle-aged. It is thought that up to 70% of ferrets ages 4 and up will develop this disease. Although the exact cause of this disease is largely unknown, it is believed the amount of natural light that the ferret is exposed to, as well as premature spaying/neutering, may play a crucial role.



What are the symptoms of Adrenal Disease?

There are many different symptoms associated with adrenal disease. Some are seen more frequently than others. The most common symptoms include:

- **Alopecia (hair loss):** The most common symptom observed in ferrets with adrenal disease is hair loss. This is seen in both male and female ferrets. Hair loss commonly begins at the tip of the tail and moves towards the body in a symmetrical pattern. It has been reported that over 90% of ferrets with this disease experience some degree of hair loss. Hair loss can also be the only symptom a ferret with this disease exhibits.
- **Enlarged Vulva (females):** The enlargement of the vulva (genital area) may or may not be accompanied by mucous discharge. The vulva may also appear bruised.
- **Pruritus (itchy skin):** Pruritus is commonly accompanied by hair loss. Pruritus is most commonly observed between the shoulder blades, and the skin may appear red in these areas.
- **Increased Thirst:** It is important to monitor how much water your ferret(s) is drinking. If you notice he/she is drinking more, contact your veterinarian.



- **Lethargy:** If your ferret seems lethargic or more tired than usual, it is important to contact your veterinarian. Lethargy can be a symptom of other problems, as well as adrenal disease.

Other symptoms include:

- **Weight loss and/or muscle deterioration:** If your ferret is consistently eating the proper amount of food but is losing weight or has any muscle loss make sure to get them to the vet!
- **Partial or complete urinary blockage (males):** Male ferrets may experience partial or complete urinary blockage, though not very common, it is caused by an enlarged prostate. If you notice your male ferret is having trouble urinating, seek medical attention immediately!
- **Enlargement of the spleen:** Enlargement of the spleen has also been documented in older ferrets; however experts are not sure if adrenal disease and the enlargement of the spleen are directly related. Spleen enlargement can be checked for by a veterinarian with a simple palpation.

Treatment options:

There are several treatment options available for ferrets affected by this disease. Consult your veterinarian for further information.

If your ferret is displaying any of these symptoms, or otherwise seems unwell, consult with your veterinarian ASAP!

Sources:

*Ferret Universe. 2008. Adrenal Disease. Retrieved October 14, 2011.
<http://www.ferretuniverse.com/health/adrenal.asp>*

Hillyer, Elizabeth and Katerine Quesenberry. 1997. Ferrets, Rabbit and Rodents: Clinical medicine and Surgery. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: W.B Saunders Company.