Preventive health care for a ferret

Starting out

A. Check general health; eyes and nose should be clear with no discharge or crusts, hair coat should be shiny and soft without scabs or lumps on the skin and pads of the feet should be soft and pink. The body should be in good condition. Ears will normally have some reddish wax present, but it should not be excessive and there should not be any crusts. If there are two blue tattoo dots on the right ear, it is an indication that the animal was already neutered and had its anal gland(s) removed at about 5 weeks of age.

B. Check when the last canine distemper shot was given and get the specific date. Before 8 weeks of age, boosters should be repeated at two week intervals. After 8 weeks of age, boosters should be repeated at 3 week intervals until the ferret is 14 weeks of age. Annual boosters should be given thereafter.

C. Check specifically what the guarantee period is and what it covers. The minimum period required by the USDA is 48 hours. Preferably have something in writing.

D. Take some time to handle the animal and get an idea if this is the one you want. Remember, most kits are a bit nippy and a little hyperactive.

E. Check what the diet was and buy some of it even if it isn't what you will be staying with. Mixing the original diet with the one you may prefer for the future for a few days will prevent stomach upsets.

Coming home

A. A cage should be ready ahead of time. A rabbit cage about 24”x30”x18” high will easily house 2 ferrets. The floor can be wire or solid but preferably NOT PLASTIC (plastic floors have led to foot disease in some pets). It is not a good idea to bring a pet home and let it loose right away, your pet may end up with a foreign body lodged in the intestine or sustain a serious injury in a short time.

B. A sleeping towel, box, snooze tube, hat or something to sleep in is essential. Ferrets like to sleep snuggled up in the dark. If your pet chews and eats towels and cloth, use a cardboard or wood box.

C. A water bottle or heavy crock for water (they like to play and tip it over) and a heavy crock bowl for food. A litter pan if you are planning to litter box train with a pelleted bedding such as Cellu Dri, Harvest litter, or Yesterdays News, etc.

D. Cat laxative for prevention of hairballs – start right away as soon as your pet arrives and use about 1-2 inches every third day.

E. FERRET PROOF YOUR HOUSE-remove rubber chew toys, shoes (especially smelly sneakers), dirty clothes, rubber bands, etc from the premises. GET ON YOUR HANDS AND KNEES to detect any holes or openings the pet could squeeze themselves into or escape from the house through. Look under furniture and mattresses to see if they can get into these places. It is best to cover the bottom of the furniture and mattresses with hardware cloth or a sheet of wood to prevent burrowing.

F. DON’T USE THE RECLINER CHAIR WHEN YOUR FERRETS ARE OUT AND ABOUT. Death by suffocation and crushing is unfortunately common.

G. Don’t travel with your pet in a hot car or leave him/her in a hot house where the temperature is 90°F or above. Ferrets are very heat intolerant and they will die quickly.

Veterinary exam

A. We recommend having your pet examined within 48 hours after purchase to make sure you are within the guarantee period and to make sure there are no major medical problems you may have missed. There is no way to physically look at a ferret and tell if there are any underlining diseases, so we usually want to run tests such as; blood test and fecal analysis.

B. Bring in the papers from the store and/or breeder you bought him from so that the we may see what vaccinations and or medications may have been given to him.

C. We recommend the vaccinations listed in the section I Starting Out. This includes the distemper series and the rabies vaccine. We recommend a rabies shot for your pet at 4 months of age and then annually. Remember you only need to do the series when they are kits there after the shots are just yearly. We recommend a canine distemper vaccination for your pet right away if the vaccination history is unknown or in doubt.

D. We recommend checking their entire body and ears for mites or other ectoparasites.
E. We will discuss neutering if not done already. We recommend neutering +/- descenting at 5-6 months of age for both sexes.

F. We recommend heartworm preventative if appropriate for your area and season. We recommend 0.05mg/lb Ivermectin given monthly. If the pet is over 6 months of age, then get a CITE heartworm test first to detect any heartworms that might already be present.

G. After hours we recommend either Chicago Veterinary Emergency Services @ (773) 281 – 7110, or Animal 911 @ (847) 673 –9110. These are the names of emergency clinics that will care for your ferret after-hours. They can be invaluable in a time of need.

H. Get information on local ferret clubs or shelters. We encourage all to join the Greater Chicago Ferret Association @ www.gcfa.com.

Help! What do I do now?

A. Lumps and Bumps – Any unusual lumps either under or on the skin should be looked at by us as soon as possible. If the lump feels very warm, is red, tender to the touch and the animal is depressed, it should not wait because you may have an abscess. Other lumps may not be an emergency, but should not be left to go on for long, as they may need to be removed or may indicate other illness.

B. Bite Wounds – Ferrets bite each other usually around the neck area and may leave scabs and nicks. Generally there is no special care necessary to heal them, as the skin in this area is very thick and heals quickly. If you need to put something on it, try some Vitamin E or Aloe Vera gel. The best thing is to separate the animals until the area is healed then try spraying diluted Bitter Apple on the animal being bitten before putting it out to play with the group again. The awful taste usually deters others from repeating the performance. You will need to apply this several times a day for at least a week.

C. Broken or Torn Nails – Generally do not need immediate Veterinary attention. Clip off any hanging piece of nail and clean with hydrogen peroxide. Use a styptic powder, crushed aspirin, or cornstarch to stop the bleeding. If swelling or discharge appear at the nail bed in the next 2 to 3 days it is time to see the us for possible antibiotic treatment. Keep the nails trimmed to prevent this problem.

D. Scratching – When ferrets scratch the are very loud about it. Some daily scratching is normal especially in the dry winter months in the house. Check for scabs, ulcers, lumps, or flea dirt. If the skin looks fine, try putting a humidifier in the room. You may use a bath oil and water spray mixture lightly misted on in the coat and rubbed in 2 or 3 times a week (one part bath oil such as Alpha Keri and 20 parts water). We also suggest not using perfumed detergents or fabric softeners on their sleeping towels, as some ferrets (like some people) are allergic to chemicals. Adding fatty acid supplements to the food in the amount of 1/8 to ¼ tsp per ferret per day may be helpful. If there is hair loss, scabs, ulcers or lumps then bring your pet in so that we may examine the lesions.

E. Coughing and Sneezing – Ferrets cough violently and they also perform a kind of “reverse sneeze” that sounds like they are choking, gagging and sneezing all at the same time. It is normal for them to do this periodically sometimes even on a daily basis. They are forever sniffing and inhaling little bits of hair, lint and dirt off the floor and they need to clear these out of their throats. However, if you notice increased frequency or intensity and if there is a loss of appetite and lethargy, it is time to see the us without delay. Some temporary relief can be given with a dab of cat laxative, Nutrical, or honey to soothe the throat until you can get him in.

F. Diarrhea – Occasional soft or runny stool is nothing to be alarmed about. If it persists for more than 24 hours or is accompanied by blood in the stool or a black, tarry consistency or lethargy, depression, crying when defecating, or loss of appetite, your pet should be seen by us. The more severe the depression or pain upon defecation, the greater the emergency. Giving Gatorade or non citrus fruit juices can help with possible dehydration. If the animal is bright, alert, eating normally, and having bright green slimy stools, he is probably dealing with a viral enteritis and it may pass in a few days. Monitor the ferret very closely. Do not give anti-diarrheal medications without the instructions of your veterinarian. These medications may only mask a serious problem and not allow the body to flush out what it is trying to remove.

G. Vomiting – Occasional vomiting in an otherwise bright and alert animal may not be a major concern. Just withhold the food for 6 to 8 hours and try again. If the vomiting is persistent, contains blood, is associated with complete appetite loss, or depression, it’s time to call us. Do not try to force oral liquids as you may only aggravate the condition.

H. Difficulty Breathing – THIS IS AN EMERGENCY. Do not wait to bring your pet in – do it right away, do not overheat him while traveling & try to keep the ferret at room temperature or a little lower.
I. Broken Legs – The animal should be caged until you can get it to a veterinary hospital. Try to handle your pet as little as possible, and if it is in a wire cage, put down towels to prevent toes getting caught in the wires. Surround him with comfortable towels so that the limb(s) will not be further injured. If the bone is protruding through the skin, this must be seen right away, do not wait to the next day.

J. Poisoning – Identify the substance and call the vet. Some things can be treated at home, but most if not all need medical care. If you do not have emergency vet care, call Poison Control (888) 426 – 4435 or (900) 443 - 0000. This will need medical alert

K. Seizuring – The ferret may scream loudly and thrash violently as if in great discomfort. It is very frightening to see, but try to remember that the animal is unconscious and does not feel anything, his body has just lost it’s control. The most common cause is low blood sugar caused by insulinoma (although this is not the only cause). Try to rub a little honey, molasses, or pancake/kayro syrup mixed with water on the gums, or if he/she can swallow, drip 1-3 cc into the mouth (about ½ tsp). It may take 30-45 min to have effect. Thereafter try to give a treat higher in protein such as it’s regular food or strained meat type human baby food to keep the sugar from dropping again too quickly. If the pet does come out of the seizure with this treatment, get it to the vet on an emergency basis right away.

L. Sudden Weakness or Coma – This may also be related to low blood sugar, but there are certainly several other possibilities. Try the treatment as described under K, and if no response get the pet to the hospital on an emergency basis. If the treatment works, still have the pet seen by a vet at the earliest possible convenience.

M. Most of these emergencies can be avoided if you follow the rules of owning a ferret. Remember, never leave them unattended, they can find danger anywhere!!

N. After hours we recommend either Chicago Veterinary Emergency Services @ (773) 281 – 7110, or Animal 911 @ (847) 673 –9110. These are the names of an emergency clinics that will care for your ferret after-hours. They can be invaluable in a time of need.

American ferrets have an average life span of five to seven years. Ferrets start to show old age or geriatric problems after they are three years of age. We feel that this is a good time to recommend some extra veterinary care as well as special home care to try to catch disease problems early, so they can be eliminated or treated. With this “geriatric program,” as we call it, we have been able to prolong life in many pets in a quality manner.

Home care
The pads of the feet in the older ferret may become hard and dry and develop little horny growths. A small amount of Vitamin E cream, oil or Vaseline rubbed on the pads daily will help to keep them soft and remove the excess tissue.

Older ferrets like to sleep for longer periods, so be sure they have a cozy spot in which to do so. Please respect that they need more sleep and don’t make them play when they don’t want to play. However, if you should notice a sudden change in sleep habits that seems unusual, please contact your veterinarian.

The hair coat may become drier and more brittle with age. Some diseases can contribute to this, but aging can also cause it. Don’t bathe your pet frequently, as this may strip the natural skin oils and worsen the condition. Bathe your pet as infrequently as possible, but no more than once a month (unless you have medical directions to do otherwise), and use a gentle pet shampoo. You may also use special preparations to add moisture back to the skin, such as emollient sprays (Comfi-Spray is a good choice), right after or in between baths. Using a fatty acid supplement, such as Linotone or Ferotone, can also be very helpful. Use 1/8 tsp. Per ferret per day on the food. If you notice hair loss, skin changes, growths, or excessive scratching please have your pet examined by your veterinarian.

Older ferrets may have less control over their bladder and bowels as they age, so make sure that the litter box or papers are easily available. Put out a few extras if they roam around so they won’t have far to go to the bathroom.

Senior citizens may become weak in the hind legs for a variety of reasons, so make sure that they can easily get in and out of their cages and litter boxes. Use ramps, if necessary to help them. Any sudden or unusual weakness or loss of balance should, of course, be brought to the attention of your veterinarian.

Your veterinarian may recommend changing your pet to a lower protein high quality adult cat food or maintenance diet after the age of five. This puts less stress on the kidneys. The change over can be gradual by mixing the original kitten formula with the adult formula over several days. Ferrets will usually convert if you use the same brand of food.

Use a cat hairball laxative at least every third day to help prevent the formation of hairballs in the stomach. Use about one inch out of the tube. Brushing your pet will also help to cut down on the amount of hair swallowed.

Make sure that food and water are always available. Going without food for too long could cause the onset of severe weakness or a seizure if your pet is dealing with a blood sugar disorder or kidney disease.
Veterinary care
More frequent checkups are recommended, which include a thorough physical exam. We recommend that this be done every six months. Ferrets develop disease rapidly, especially cancer, kidney and heart disease, and waiting an entire year between visits could prevent the early detection and management of these diseases.

Starting at three years of age, we recommend some additional laboratory work be done. On a healthy animal, we recommend a complete blood cell count and a fasting blood glucose as the minimum work-up (a “mini” geriatric). The pet should be fasted four to no more than six hours prior to the blood tests being taken. This routine laboratory work should be done at least once a year.

Your veterinarian may also wish to do additional laboratory work such as a blood chemistry profile and/or and X-ray for additional information, particularly if your pet is exhibiting signs of illness. Sedation may be necessary for the X-ray. We use isoflurane gas anesthesia on our ferret patients which is very safe and eliminates the stress the pet may feel with these procedures.

After the age of seven, diagnostic testing may have to be done every six months along with the semiannual exam. These laboratory workups have been INVALUABLE in detecting many diseases early and thus facilitating treatment.

Please keep up with the annual canine distemper vaccination. The older ferrets can contract distemper just as easily as the youngsters. Continue with annual rabies boosters also.

Heartworm preventative should also be continued if your pet is kept outdoors or is taken outdoors frequently in the spring and summer.

Tartar can be cleaned off the teeth easily when the animal is anesthetized with isoflurane for the geriatric work-up. This prevents gum and tooth disease.

Unfortunately, neoplasia (cancer) is the most common cause of disease and death in the older American ferret. We estimate that well over seventy-five percent of all ferrets in our area will develop some form of cancer in their life time. The only way to combat all forms of cancer is with early detection and then appropriate therapy. We must emphasize that EARLY detection is the key, and thus the need for frequent exams and laboratory work. Below are outlined four of the most common types of cancer seen in the older pet.

Lymohosarcoma
This cancer is not restricted to old ferrets. It also may occur in young animals. In many ferrets it tends to hide unnoticed with no signs for months or years and then suddenly appear in a variety of forms. It is a cancer of the lymphatic system, which is part of the body’s immune system. The cause is suspected to be a virus. Although much is still unknown, the theory is that the virus is initially transmitted from mother to kit where it may lay dormant for a long period before causing a problem. Transmission between adult animals is also possible, but the method of transmission is not completely understood. At this point in time it does not appear to be highly transmissible between adults.

Signs vary, and as already stated, many animals have no outward signs for a long period of time. Disease in these animals may be detected by abnormalities in the complete blood cell count. Noticeable changes in other animals may include any of the following signs: swollen lymph nodes, enlarged spleen (there are many causes of enlarged spleens, and in some cases it may be “normal”), wasting, lethargy, frequent illnesses (such as “colds”), poor appetite, difficulty breathing, chronic diarrhea or hind limb weakness.

The diagnosis is made from a combination of a complete blood cell count and either a biopsy of a lymph node, a bone marrow biopsy, X-rays, or biopsies of other affected areas.

Treatment is achieved through chemotherapy, the details of which can be discussed with your veterinarian. We have had about a fifty percent success rate with chemotherapy with life being prolonged for six months to five years post treatment. Most ferrets tolerate the therapy very well and have few side effects. Even those cases that are not good chemotherapy candidates may be helped to continue a quality life with the use of nutritional therapy and corticosteroids.

Insulinoma
This is one of the most common cancers that we see. At least fifty percent or more of the ferrets over three years of age will develop this disease. It is a cancer of the beta cells of the pancreas (the cells that produce insulin). This cancer causes these cells to produce abnormally high levels of insulin. This increase in insulin has the effect of driving the sugar out of the blood stream and into the body’s cells at too rapid of a rate. This causes a dangerous decrease in the blood sugar level. The brain, which needs a constant large supply of sugar, then becomes sugar starved and begins behaving in an erratic manner. The abnormally functioning brain provides most of the signs that we see in insulinoma. Early in the disease, the body counteracts the sugar drop by producing more sugar from the liver which then temporarily corrects the problem, so symptoms are very subtle. As the disease progresses, and the body is less able to cope with the situation, the signs become more severe and last longer.

Early signs of the disease are usually no more noticeable than seeing the ferret stare blankly into space for a few seconds and then return to normal. He may be a little more difficult to awaken from his naps. As the disease progresses, however, the signs become
more specific and may include the following: drooling or salivating, pawing frantically at the mouth (all these signs are probably caused by a feeling of nausea when the sugar drops), extreme lethargy, seizures and finally coma and death.

The diagnosis is based on a fasting blood sugar level. The pet should be fasted for a minimum of 18 to 24 hours. Occasionally it may also be necessary to run blood insulin levels at the same time.

Treatment depends on the stage of the disease and the overall condition of the pet. Usually, surgery is the first treatment choice. The tumor or tumors are removed and further medication may be unnecessary or at least delayed for some time. When surgery is not possible for whatever reason or in cases where the disease returns despite surgery, then medical management is indicated. This involves a good quality, high protein diet always available, and the use of protein snacks such as cooked meat and egg scraps or strained meat baby food. The addition of Brewer’s yeast in the amount of 1/8 to 1/4 tsp of the powder or 1/8 to 1/4 of a chewable tablet two times daily with food has also been helpful to stabilize glucose levels. Brewer’s yeast contains chromium which is known as the glucose tolerance factor because it helps to stabilize bloodglucose and insulin swings. No sugary treats should be given, as this may make the problem worse. When diet no longer controls the signs, then the pet may have to be put on corticosteroids and Proglycem which is an insulin blocking agent. Treatment will be for life.

If you should notice any of the signs listed above, especially the serious ones such as seizures and coma, you can help bring your pet out of these conditions by administering some honey and water by mouth until the pet is more alert or has stopped seizuring. As long as he can swallow, administer some of his normal food or a meat type strained baby food to get protein into his system. Of course, contact your veterinarian and have your pet examined as soon as possible.

Adrenal adenoma or adenocarcinoma
This cancer is as common as insulinoma and frequently occurs along with it. This is a cancer of the adrenal glands, which are very tiny organs about the size of half a pea, located near the kidney. They produce very potent hormones that control a number of metabolic functions in the body. Ferrets may develop adenoma, which is the benign form of the disease (which means that it does not spread to other organs of the body) or adenocarcinoma, which is the malignant form. They may develop disease in either one or both glands.

Signs are fairly specific and are related to an overproduction of hormones, particularly androgens (precursors to the sex hormones . . . they act in the same manner as estrogen, progesterone and testosterone). The most common sign seen is a hair loss over a portion or all of the body. The hair loss may come and go over a period of time. In spayed females, the vulva may swell as if they are in heat again. Other signs may include one or any combination of the following: intense itching, dry brittle hair coat, thin skin, red scaly skin, weakened muscles with hind limb or generalized weakness, increase in body odor (as if the pet was not neutered), anemia and lethargy. The diagnosis is based primarily on the signs. However if the diagnosis is in doubt, your veterinarian may recommend submitting a blood sample to a lab for hormone level evaluation.

The treatment of choice is the surgical removal of the affected adrenal gland. Since this disease and insulinoma frequently occur at the same time, insulinomas can also be removed. In cases where adenoma is diagnosed, and in the absence of insulinoma, a drug called Lysodren may be used to chemically destroy the overactive parts of the adrenal. This drug is not effective against adenocarcinoma.

Skin tumors
Skin tumors in older ferrets would be surgically removed as soon as possible because of the possibility that some are malignant and an spread to other areas of the body. The most common type of skin tumor in the ferret is the mast cell tumor which appears as a round raised button-like lesion. They may be quite itchy and often have a crust of dried blood over the top. They are usually benign, but may metastasize to internal organs including the lungs.

Other common skin tumors are adenomas and adenocarcinomas. They are cancers of skin glands and can occur anywhere. In males they occur frequently at the tip of the prepuce and appear as a bluish colored lump. Adenocarcinomas are highly malignant and should be removed as soon as possible.

Although ferrets in this country are plagued with a variety of illnesses as they get older, frequent examinations and laboratory testing as needed can greatly improve their chances of survival and prolong their lives in a quality manner. Enjoy your pet, give them love and attention and they will reward you with endless hours of laughter and love.

THANK YOU FOR GIVING US THE OPPORTUNITY TO SERVE YOU AND YOUR PET> PLEASE CALL THE CLINIC AT (773) 878-802 IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS REGARDING YOUR PET’S HEALTH.