

Ferret

Care Guide for New Owners

Ferret

Exotic Pet

Highly Social

Obligate Carnivore

Quick Facts at a Glance

Species	Mustela putorius furo
Lifespan	6 to 10 years
Adult Size	13 to 16 inches long plus tail; males 2 to 4 lbs, females 1 to 2 lbs
Activity Cycle	Crepuscular; most active at dawn and dusk, sleep up to 18 hours daily
Temperament	Playful, mischievous, social, and intelligent; bonds strongly with owners
Housing	Large multi-level cage; minimum 3x3x2 ft with daily free-roam time
Diet	Obligate carnivore; high-protein, high-fat, low-carbohydrate diet required
Spay/Neuter	Critical for health, especially for females; see health section
Odor	Naturally musky; descenting removes anal glands but does not eliminate odor
Social Needs	Thrive in pairs or groups; single ferrets need extensive daily interaction
Legal Status	Illegal to own in California and Hawaii; check local ordinances
Good with Kids?	Yes with supervision; ferrets nip when excited and must be handled correctly

Meet the Ferret

Ferrets are one of the most entertaining, chaotic, and deeply affectionate small animals you can share your home with. They are endlessly curious, remarkably playful well into adulthood, and form genuinely strong bonds with their people. A ferret who trusts you will seek you out, fall asleep in your lap, and

make you laugh every single day.

They are also a serious commitment. Ferrets require a significant amount of daily interaction and out-of-cage time, a specific high-protein diet, regular veterinary care with a vet who knows ferrets, and a fully ferret-proofed environment. They are escape artists, dedicated chewers, and absolute experts at getting into things they should not. For an owner who is ready for that, they are extraordinary companions.

A Note on Legality

Ferrets are illegal to own in California and Hawaii, and some cities and counties in other states have their own restrictions. Always verify local laws before adopting a ferret.

Where They Come From

Domestic ferrets (*Mustela putorius furo*) are descended from the European polecat and have been domesticated for at least 2,500 years, making them one of the oldest domesticated animals still commonly kept as pets. They were originally bred and used for hunting, particularly for flushing rabbits and rodents from burrows, a practice called ferreting that is still used in some parts of the world today.

Ferrets are members of the Mustelidae family, which includes weasels, otters, badgers, and minks. Their long, flexible bodies, short legs, and intense curiosity are hallmarks of the mustelid family. In the United States, the ferret pet trade grew significantly in the 1980s and 1990s, and most pet ferrets today come from large commercial breeding operations, particularly Marshall Farms and Zoom's, though small breeders and rescues are also sources.

Housing and Habitat

Ferrets need a large, secure, multi-level cage and several hours of supervised free-roam time every single day. A ferret kept in a small cage with limited out-of-cage time will become depressed, destructive, and physically unhealthy. The cage is where they sleep and stay when unsupervised. Their real life happens outside of it.

Cage Size and Setup

The minimum cage size is 3 feet wide by 3 feet deep by 2 feet tall, and bigger is always better. Multi-level cages with ramps, hammocks, and sleeping areas are ideal because ferrets love to climb and explore vertical space. The Ferret Nation and Critter Nation cages are widely recommended in the ferret community for their size, solid shelf options, and ease of cleaning.

The cage must have a solid floor or solid-surface shelves throughout. Wire mesh floors and ramps cause foot injuries and are extremely uncomfortable for ferrets to walk on. Cover any wire surfaces with fleece, rubber shelf liner, or solid platforms. Bar spacing should be no more than 1 inch to prevent escape.

Bedding and Sleeping Areas

Ferrets love to burrow and sleep in enclosed, dark spaces. Hammocks, sleep sacks, fabric tubes, and fleece pouches are all beloved by ferrets and should be provided in abundance throughout the cage. Ferrets sleep deeply, often 14 to 18 hours a day, and they like to pile together when they have companions.

For cage flooring, fleece liners or soft fabric is comfortable and easy to wash. Avoid loose bedding like wood shavings or paper pellets as the primary flooring, as ferrets are likely to ingest them. Spot-clean the cage daily and do a full clean at least weekly.

Litter Training

Ferrets can be reliably litter trained. They tend to back into corners to eliminate, so place litter boxes in the corners of the cage and in the corners of their free-roam area. High-backed corner litter boxes work best. Use paper-based litter or wood pellets. Never use clumping cat litter, clay litter, or corn cob litter, as these cause respiratory issues and intestinal blockage if ingested.

Free-Roam Time: Non-Negotiable

Ferrets must have a minimum of 3 to 4 hours of out-of-cage time every day. Many ferret owners allow significantly more. During free-roam, ferrets need a fully ferret-proofed space. Ferret-proofing is extensive and includes blocking all gaps and holes (ferrets can squeeze through any opening their head fits through), covering or hiding all electrical cords, removing rubber and foam items they can chew and swallow, blocking access under and behind appliances, and securing cabinet doors.

Ferret-Proofing Is Serious Business

Ferrets have been injured or killed by recliner chairs and rocking chairs (they crawl inside the mechanisms), dryers, dishwashers, and gaps behind stoves. Check all furniture mechanisms before use if your ferret has access to the room. Always know where your ferret is before sitting down or closing any appliance door.

Temperature

Ferrets are comfortable between 55 and 72 degrees F. They are sensitive to heat and can develop heatstroke at temperatures above 80 degrees F. Keep them in a cool, air-conditioned space during warm months and away from direct sunlight.

Diet and Nutrition

Ferrets are obligate carnivores with a short, simple digestive tract designed for processing animal protein and fat. They cannot digest plant material effectively, and a diet high in carbohydrates causes serious long-term health problems including insulinoma, a cancer of the pancreas that is tragically common in ferrets fed grain-heavy kibble. Getting the diet right is one of the most important things you can do for your ferret's long-term health.

Raw or Whole Prey Diet

Many experienced ferret owners and ferret health advocates recommend a raw meat diet as the most biologically appropriate option. A raw diet consists of whole prey items like mice, chicks, or quail, or a combination of raw muscle meat, organ meat, and raw meaty bones. This closely mirrors what a ferret would eat in the wild and avoids the carbohydrate-heavy fillers found in most kibble. If you choose to feed raw, research the prey model raw (PMR) or whole prey approach thoroughly to ensure nutritional balance.

High-Quality Kibble

If raw feeding is not feasible, choose a high-quality kibble with animal protein as the first several ingredients and no grains, corn, peas, or legumes. Look for a protein content of at least 35 to 40 percent and a fat content of at least 18 to 22 percent. Carbohydrate content should be as low as possible. Zupreem, Wysong Epigen, and Orijen Cat and Kitten are among the better options. Avoid all ferret-specific foods sold at large pet store chains, as most are grain-heavy and inappropriate for ferret nutrition.

Why Carbohydrates Are Harmful

Ferrets' bodies are not designed to regulate blood sugar from carbohydrate sources. A lifetime of high-carb kibble stresses the pancreas and is strongly associated with insulinoma, a cancer that causes chronically low blood sugar and is extremely common in ferrets in the United States. Ferrets in countries where raw feeding is more common have significantly lower insulinoma rates.

Feeding Schedule

Ferrets have a very fast metabolism and a short digestive tract. They eat frequently throughout the day, typically every 3 to 4 hours. For this reason, food should be available at all times (free-choice feeding) rather than offered at set meal times. Fresh water must also be available constantly, from a sipper bottle or heavy ceramic crock.

Treats

Safe ferret treats are meat-based. Small pieces of cooked chicken, turkey, or egg are appropriate occasional treats. Avoid all sugary treats, fruit, vegetables, grains, and commercial ferret treats that

contain sugar, as these contribute directly to insulinoma development over time.

Safe Treats

- Small pieces of cooked chicken or turkey (plain)
- Cooked or scrambled egg (no seasoning)
- Small pieces of cooked organ meat
- Freeze-dried meat treats (single ingredient only)

Never Feed These

- Fruit of any kind (too much sugar)
- Vegetables or grains
- Dairy products
- Commercial ferret treats with sugar
- Raisins (toxic)
- Anything sweet or carbohydrate-heavy

Handling and Interaction

Ferrets are social animals who bond deeply with their people. They are also high-energy, fast-moving, and prone to nipping when overstimulated or during play. Nipping is normal ferret communication but needs to be addressed with consistent training so it does not become a biting problem.

Nip Training

Young ferrets, called kits, nip frequently as part of play. When your ferret nips too hard, make a firm, high-pitched sound to signal that it hurt, similar to what another ferret would do, and briefly disengage from play. Consistency is key. Never flick or hit a ferret as a correction, as this breaks trust and can cause fear-based biting. With patient, consistent training most ferrets learn appropriate bite pressure quickly.

Scruffing

Scruffing, lifting a ferret by the loose skin at the back of the neck, is sometimes used to briefly restrain a ferret for nail trims or medical procedures. It causes most ferrets to go limp and yawn, which is a normal response. It should not be used as a regular handling method or as punishment. Use it sparingly and only when necessary.

Play and Enrichment

Ferrets need interactive play every day. They love tunnels, crinkle toys, balls they can bat around, and anything they can drag, steal, or hide. Many ferrets enjoy a game of chase or wrestling with their owners. Dig boxes filled with rice, dried beans, or strips of paper are great for burrowing enrichment. Rotate toys regularly to keep things interesting.

The War Dance

When a ferret is extremely excited and happy, they perform the dook dance, also called the war dance: a sideways hopping, bouncing, and leaping display accompanied by a soft clucking sound called dooking. It looks like they are having a small seizure, but it means pure joy. If your ferret dooks and war dances, you are doing everything right.

Grooming

Ferrets are naturally clean animals and groom themselves regularly. Their grooming needs from you are relatively minimal but consistent.

Nails

Ferret nails grow quickly and need trimming every 2 to 4 weeks. Overgrown nails catch on fabric and cage bars, causing injury. Use small animal nail clippers and trim just the curved tip, avoiding the pink quick. Many ferret owners distract their ferrets with a small amount of Ferretone or salmon oil on their belly during nail trims.

Ears

Ferrets produce a significant amount of dark brown earwax and need their ears cleaned every 1 to 2 weeks. Use a cotton ball or a soft cloth dampened with a pet ear cleaner or a small amount of mineral oil. Clean only the visible outer ear canal. Never insert anything into the ear canal. Signs of an ear problem include head shaking, scratching at the ears, dark crumbly debris, and odor beyond normal earwax.

Bathing

Ferrets have a natural musky odor that comes from skin glands, not the anal glands. Bathing too frequently actually increases odor because it strips the skin oils and causes the glands to overproduce. Bathe your ferret no more than once a month unless they are visibly dirty. Use a gentle ferret or kitten shampoo, warm water, and dry them thoroughly afterward. Keep them warm until fully dry.

Common Health Issues

Ferrets are prone to several serious health conditions, many of which are influenced by diet and genetics. Annual vet visits with a ferret-experienced exotic vet are strongly recommended, with twice-yearly checkups for ferrets over 3 years old.

Insulinoma

A cancer of the insulin-producing cells in the pancreas, insulinoma is one of the most common ferret diseases in the United States. It causes chronically low blood sugar (hypoglycemia). Signs include weakness, staring blankly, pawing at the mouth, drooling, stumbling, and seizures. Strongly linked to high-carbohydrate diets. Managed with medication, dietary changes, and sometimes surgery. Annual blood glucose testing is recommended for ferrets over 3 years old.

Adrenal Gland Disease

Extremely common in ferrets, particularly those spayed or neutered at a very young age. Signs include symmetrical hair loss starting at the tail and progressing forward, itchy skin, muscle wasting, and in females, an enlarged vulva. Treatable with hormone implants (Suprelorin/deslorelin) or surgery. Annual vet monitoring is important.

Lymphoma

One of the most common cancers in ferrets. Can affect many organs. Signs vary widely depending on location but often include weight loss, lethargy, enlarged lymph nodes, and reduced appetite. Diagnosis requires biopsy. Treatment options include chemotherapy and supportive care.

Epizootic Catarrhal Enteritis (ECE)

A highly contagious viral disease spread between ferrets, often called the green slime disease. Signs include bright green mucousy diarrhea, vomiting, lethargy, and rapid weight loss. New ferrets should be quarantined before introduction to resident ferrets. Requires aggressive supportive veterinary care.

Aleutian Disease (ADV)

A parvovirus that causes progressive immune system damage. Spread through contact with infected ferrets or their bodily fluids. Some ferrets are carriers without showing symptoms. Signs include weight loss, weakness, black tarry stools, and neurological symptoms. No cure. Testing new ferrets before introduction to a household is recommended.

Cardiomyopathy (Heart Disease)

Dilated cardiomyopathy is common in older ferrets. Signs include lethargy, difficulty breathing, coughing, fluid accumulation, and exercise intolerance. Manageable with cardiac medications under veterinary supervision.

Foreign Body Obstruction

Ferrets chew and swallow rubber, foam, fabric, and small objects, which can cause life-threatening intestinal blockages. Signs include loss of appetite, pawing at the mouth, lethargy, vomiting, and straining to defecate. Always a surgical emergency. Ferret-proofing your home and removing all rubber and foam items is the best prevention.

Influenza

Ferrets can catch human influenza and can transmit it back to humans. Signs mirror human flu: sneezing, runny nose, lethargy, and fever. Keep sick family members away from ferrets and wash hands before and after handling if anyone in the household is ill.

Things Every New Ferret Owner Should Know

Ferrets are a 6 to 10 year commitment.

Think carefully about where your life might be in a decade. Ferrets are not a starter pet or an impulse purchase. They require daily time, ongoing vet care, and a dedicated, ferret-proofed living space.

Find a ferret-savvy exotic vet immediately.

Most general practice vets do not have meaningful ferret experience. Find a vet who specifically sees ferrets before you bring one home. Ferret health issues can escalate very quickly.

Free-roam time is not optional.

A ferret that lives in its cage without daily out-of-cage time becomes depressed, lethargic, and physically unwell. Plan for at least 3 to 4 hours every single day.

The smell is real, and it does not fully go away.

Ferrets have a natural musky odor from their skin glands. Descending removes the anal glands but does not eliminate the musky smell. Frequent cage cleaning, regular bedding washes, and monthly bathing help manage it. If odor is a dealbreaker, a ferret may not be the right pet for your household.

Diet matters enormously for long-term health.

Feeding a grain-heavy or carbohydrate-heavy diet is directly linked to insulinoma, the most common ferret cancer. Do the research and feed appropriately from the very beginning.

Ferrets steal everything.

Ferrets are compulsive thieves and hoarders. They will steal socks, keys, small toys, remote controls, and anything else they can drag. Check your ferret's favorite stash spots regularly and remove anything potentially dangerous.

They sleep a lot and that is normal.

Ferrets sleep 14 to 18 hours a day. A ferret that is asleep is not sick. A ferret that is limp, unresponsive, or difficult to wake, however, needs immediate attention.

Multiple ferrets are often easier than one.

Ferrets are highly social animals and often thrive with a companion. Two ferrets entertain each other, play together, and sleep in piles. They also still need daily human interaction, but a bonded pair is generally happier than a solitary ferret.

Questions? We're Here!

Boggy's Buddies is always happy to answer questions and support you throughout your ferret ownership journey. Reach us at boggysbuddies@gmail.com or find us on Facebook and Instagram.