

Are Ferrets The Fountain Of Youth?

Caring for a ferret provides unexpected, positive benefits to owners.

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While ferrets don't make the best pets for very small children or very elderly people, they can, according to many enthusiasts, keep their owners young in mind, body and soul. Even the medical world seems to agree: It's a proven fact that pet owners live longer. A recent study by the U.S. Department of Health revealed that 28 percent of heart patients with pets survived serious heart attacks, compared to only 6 percent of sufferers who didn't have furry friends.

Another study by the U.S. Department of Health showed that the cholesterol levels of animal lovers were 2 percent lower than the cholesterol levels of those without companion critters, and furthermore the risk of those pet owners suffering a heart attack was reduced by 4 percent.

Sharing your home with a ferret (or any indoor pet) can reduce your blood pressure as effectively as a low-salt diet or reducing your alcohol intake, doctors say. A U.S. survey by the Physician's Health Study Research Group of 1,000 Medicare patients showed that 40 percent of the elderly who owned house pets sought the services of a doctor much less frequently than those without four-legged roommates.

A Sense Of Purpose Having a pet that you need to be responsible for is part of being youthful, said Emma Wilcox of New Jersey. "When I turned 50, I was feeling really old," she said with a wry chuckle. "I know 50 is supposed to be the new 40, but I wasn't buying that. My kids had left home, I was divorced and I was stuck in a dead-end job. I was feeling pretty low." Wilcox's 20-something daughter knew this, and thought a new pet might perk up her mom. "She brought me a baby ferret for Mother's Day," Wilcox said. Normally, pets don't make good gifts; in this case, Wilcox's daughter knew that her mother loved animals, was a responsible person, had enough time and money, and furthermore she had expressed interest in owning a ferret "someday."

"This little ball of fuzz was the cutest thing I'd ever seen — except, of course, for my own babies when they were born! I named him Little Bit." Putting "Bit" in the baby's name may not have been the best omen, as the kit loved to teethe on Wilcox's fingers. "He never broke the skin and it really didn't hurt," she said, "But I was determined to learn how to break him of the habit."

While it may have been a small quest, the desire to learn more about ferret behavior led Wilcox to the book, *Ferrets For Dummies*. "It was the first time I'd bought anything like a 'how-to' book in five years," Wilcox admitted. This led to renewed interest in learning, which led to Wilcox taking courses at her local junior college, which in turn led to a better job and an overall happier life. "All because I took responsibility for a new pet." Fala Ashy of Washington also took responsibility for a ferret and found herself feeling younger.

"I'm not old, but I was feeling pretty run-down before Snickers came into my life," she said, referring to her tiny, silver mitt. "I was visiting a friend of a friend at a barbecue, and way back in the corner, in the back yard by the shed, I noticed a bunny hutch. So I went over to take a look, and I saw a super-small, little ferret in there. She looked so forlorn. She was kind of scrawny, and her coat was a mess. I didn't see any water in the cage at all. Long story short, I wound up with Snickers, and we both got a new lease on life," Ashy said.

Snickers was sick with insulinoma, and required round-the-clock doses of Peditapred. Instead of making Ashy feel even more worn-out, the schedule gave her energy and a newfound sense of purpose. Snickers' health improved, and, "I noticed an interesting side effect," Ashy said. "As she gained weight, my friends asked me if I'd lost weight or taken a weekend vacation! I was just happy that my girl was getting better."

Join The Group Having a sense of community is also a great way to keep a youthful outlook. While this can be done online by joining clubs, keeping a blog about your ferret, or taking part in a specialized group, the ideal way is to "get out there" with your bubbly buddy. "My ferrets and I take part in specially organized play-days every summer," said Ned Smith of Ontario, Canada. "I'm 42, and if it weren't for my ferrets, Circe and Piggy, I'd be home every weekend watching TV. As it turns out, I've lost the spare tire, and I do feel younger."

Joining a ferret-friendly group and taking part in activities is like starting a new habit. By doing such things, according to the bestselling self-help author Deepak Chopra, you can “reset” your biostat (your biological and functional age) making yourself up to 15 years younger than your chronological age, just by taking some simple steps to change your routine.

Marsha Wheaton of Washington said, “When I was in grade school, I used to be very competitive. I lived for my baseball team and for the debating team. As I got older and went into the workforce, my competitive nature really didn’t change, but it wasn’t fun anymore. I was feeling way too grown up,” she chuckled. “But then, I discovered the world of ferret showing.”

Wheaton has three non-pedigreed ferrets that she shows in pet-level competitions just for kicks, but it had an interesting side effect. “The fun of the shows, and hanging out with like-minded people, racking up the ribbons and everything, it made me feel like I did back in junior high school. It’s a blast!”

On The Move Even though long walks are not recommended for ferrets, even shorter excursions outside (in temperate weather, of course) on a leash can help ferret moms and dads reduce their stress, lower blood pressure, lose weight, keep boredom at bay, and further develop their relationship with an inherently fun-loving, curious pet.

Factor in the benefits of being out in the sunshine, enjoying the birds and trees, and saying hello to your neighbors, and there’s no good reason not to put the harness and leash on your fuzzy friend and step out.

“I can’t walk for very long or very quickly,” said Olive Banks of Nevada, who recently entered her late 60s. “So a ferret is the perfect walking companion for me.” Banks and her two ferrets, Ollie and Coffee, go for daily walks around the block — just once — in her quiet neighborhood. “My doctor said it’s very good for me, and that in addition to my diet, the walks help keep my joints supple and blood pressure down. I probably wouldn’t feel as motivated to get out there and do it, if it wasn’t for Ollie and Coffee. They enjoy our walks so much.”

Linda Ricardo, 52, of New Jersey said that while she doesn’t go out on walks with her ferrets, they definitely give her a run for her money. “I’m constantly bending, stretching and swooping when I romp with them in their playroom. Plus, I’m always busy bending down to clean up poopies and reaching into the cages to scoop them out.” It’s not exactly Richard Simmons’ Sweatin’ to the Oldies, but she does feel younger because she is constantly on the move.

Spreading The Joy Gemma Thorson of Missouri has a very calm, loving ferret that she takes to retirement homes as therapy for senior citizens. “There is a certification process for this,” Thorson said, “And my girl ferret, Cinnamon, is completely acceptable, the same as a dog, cat, rabbit or a miniature horse.”

While not as many seniors can reminisce about their childhoods with family dogs or work horses, for instance, “The ferret is a novelty. It gives them something to say ‘wow’ about, and to look forward to,” Thorson said. “I believe that having something to look forward to is part of staying young at heart.”

Thorson read an article called “Volunteer Your Dog and Your Heart,” which she thinks applies to all four-legged therapists, including ferrets. Not only do the visits make the ferret and the infirm person happy, it’s ultimately rewarding for the ferret mom or dad as well: “Even though me and Cinnamon have met some wonderful old folks who’ve passed on ... and that’s always hard ... it still warms me inside to know that we might have made some kind of difference in someone’s last months or weeks of life. As such, you realize how precious life is.” That, as far as Thorson is concerned, is part of keeping a youthful outlook.

Randy Belair, founder of the Ferret Aid Society in Toronto, Ontario, had a very personal introduction into the world of therapeutic ferrets and witnessed firsthand that although they can’t bring about miracle cures, they can help people feel better (and consequently, more youthful). “I used to take a ferret into the hospital when my mom was on the oncology ward. We visited a few patients just about weekly with a ferret called Mandrake.

“Mandrake really did well with the sick people and a few times shared the tray of hospital food with them! My mom really benefited from visits with Mandrake as well. Mom missed the companionship of her furry friends at home, and Mandrake helped her remember what it was like to cuddle a soft, warm, fuzzy body.

“After only a few visits to the hospital, everyone knew Mandrake,” Belair said. “There would be line-ups outside my mother’s hospital room of people in wheelchairs and walkers, all fighting cancer, many terminal. All of them were there to see Mandrake and get kisses from the cute ferret that had come to brighten their day.

Nursing homes that use companion animal therapy have reported a significant reduction in the use of prescription drugs, so the overall cost of caring for seniors also dropped. Could the medical advice of the future be: "Tickle two ferrets, and call me in the morning"?

Snicker, Chortle & Laugh Having a pet to come home is another simple way that ferrets help their owners feel happier and, therefore, more youthful. "My ferrets never fail to make me smile. I laugh a lot, every day," said Cecile Riche of New York. One of the side effects of laughter is living longer, according to medical doctors (the most famous of who is Patch Adams, whose life was a basis of a film starring Robin Williams).

Research shows that laughter decreases our so-called "stress hormones." These hormones suppress the immune system, increase obstructions in the arteries and raise blood pressure. When we laugh at our ferrets' antics, our immune systems are strengthened and our concentration of salivary immunoglobulin A goes up, which defends against infectious viruses entering through the respiratory tract. A super-hearty horselaugh also gives a workout to muscles throughout your body.

Fad-Free There's no doubt we're living in a youth-obsessed culture; that's nothing new. Even before Ponce de Leon looked high and low for that legendary fountain, the Egyptians were wearing makeup and bowing to a boy king.

From the vitamin blitz to botox, people have tried everything to keep Father Time at bay. But our favorite "fad" is ferrets: They'll get you running, laughing, asserting, caring and taking responsibility, all of which will help you feel happier, healthier and more youthful.