

Litter Training, Furniture, Odor And Ferrets

A Potential ferret owner asks about litter training, furniture and odor problems with ferrets.

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Q: After several years of thought, I am considering getting a ferret, maybe two ferrets as I see it's recommended to get a pair. My biggest worry is about ferret droppings and urine all through the house. I want to get the ferrets at a young age, unless you have a better suggestion. I want them to know me from the beginning. My concern about litter training is because I want to get them young. Is it hard to litter train and what should I expect? I am a caring man who loves animals, and I want a ferret for companionship. They are just so darn cute, and my grand kids would love them. I know they are time consuming when it comes to play time. That is why I want a ferret.

I am thinking of keeping them in my room where they will be with me all the time. In other rooms they could get lost in heater ducts or other places in my three-story house built in the 1920s. Do I need to worry about them chewing on the wooden legs on my new dining room table, chairs and hutch? If so, I would appreciate your advice on how to prevent this.

I am a bit disabled, and I know I will be taking on a task. What is really needed to litter train, how often should they be bathed and how often do I need to clean the cage? I want to be the best provider for them. I really want a ferret or a couple ferrets, but I do not want to get discouraged with a mess or a smell in the house.

A: I am glad to hear that you have taken your time in considering getting a ferret for a pet. Too many people get animals on a whim and don't take the time to consider the affect it will have on their lives or on the life of the pet if they turn it in to an animal shelter because things didn't work out as they thought.

Baby ferrets, known as kits or pups, can be a lot of fun. Watching them experience something for the first time, such as their first toy or first paper bag, can be very amusing and endearing. Kits do need more time and training though, so if you are not home a lot, you may want to opt for a slightly older animal — such as a juvenile (6 months to a year) or a young adult (1 to 2 years).

Litter Training Ferrets

Ferrets are not hard to litter train if you have time and patience. I recommend that you have a cage for your ferrets for when you can't supervise them until you are sure that they are hitting the litter box regularly. Even then, some ferrets occasionally miss the litter box. Young ferrets especially may get distracted by playing and will suddenly realize that they need to go now! They will inevitably head for the nearest corner, whether there is a litter box there or not.

Initially, have a litter box in every corner of every room that you plan to let your ferrets play in. For kits, place them in the litter box every 20 to 30 minutes while they are out playing and remind them to "go potty." If the ferret does not go and starts walking out of the litter box, set it back in the litter box repeatedly until it does its business. If the ferret just ate or just woke up, set it in a litter box within 15 minutes of its meal or awakening. Most ferrets need to eliminate shortly after eating or waking. Be sure to praise the ferret when it goes. You can even offer it a treat as positive reinforcement. After a month or so, if you notice the ferret use a specific litter box or two, start taking away the extra litter boxes. If the ferrets use all of the litter boxes, then you may want to leave all of the litter boxes indefinitely.

Furniture And Ferrets

Ferrets do not generally chew on wood, so wooden furniture is usually safe from harm. Ferrets have been known to burrow into the fabric part of sofas, overstuffed chairs and beds. This can be dangerous to the ferret as it can get trapped inside the fabric or someone may inadvertently sit on it and kill the ferret. Nailing plywood or hardware cloth (a type of screening) to the bottom of the furniture usually rectifies this problem. You still may have to check for ferrets burrowing under cushions or between the mattress and box spring of the bed.

Some ferrets also like to climb up into dresser drawers and some have been known to climb up hanging clothes or drapes and have gained access to shelves, windows and other places that they should not go. I recommend having a room for the ferrets to play in when they are unsupervised that is devoid of furniture and keeping an eagle eye on them when they are in rooms that have furniture. Reclining chairs are especially a no-no because a ferret can potentially get hurt or killed in the mechanism if the chair is not totally in the upright position.

It is also important to ferret-proof rooms that you don't plan on letting your ferrets in. Ferrets are excellent escape artists and can be very determined to get to places where you don't expect them to be. Ferrets can often slip under doors or climb over barriers. If you plan to put barriers across doors to rooms that you want to keep your ferret in or out of, make sure they are at least 26 inches high. I have known many ferrets to get over 24-inch barriers. Plexiglass makes a good barrier because it is smooth and does not offer a grip for the ferrets to climb on. It is clear so you can see your ferrets and they can see you.

Odor Control And Ferrets

Ferrets have scent glands in their skin that gives off musk. The main purposes for this musk are to mark territory and to attract a mate. Neutering the ferrets (most ferrets at pet stores are already neutered) deactivates these glands to a great extent, but some musk is still produced. Washing your ferrets' bedding at least once a week, and washing your floors and shampooing your carpets will keep odors to a minimum. You can bathe your ferrets once a month or so, but overbathing makes them produce more musk and can dry out the fur. There are several ferret-deodorizing sprays on the market, and you can use them occasionally to freshen up your pets if you find that they are getting a little musky. Make sure that you use products that are made for ferrets. Don't use dog products, human perfumes or deodorizers on your ferrets. Do not use a lot of room- deodorizing sprays either, because ferrets have delicate respiratory systems. It is not a good idea to use fragrant fabric softeners on your ferrets' bedding, and never use aromatic wood shavings, such as cedar, for their litter.

Also, if you decide you want to open your windows to air out the house occasionally, make sure that your ferrets do not have access to the windowsills. If any furniture is near your windows, move it at least 3 feet away from the sill. Ferrets have been known to claw through regular window screen and have escaped or fallen to their deaths. You can sometimes reinforce the screens with heavy gauge hardware cloth, but make sure your ferrets can't pull the screen out of the frame.

Last of all, you mentioned that you were slightly disabled. Without knowing what your disability is, I do want to caution you about opening doors — especially ones that lead outside. Ferrets are very fast and can slip past you in seconds. Make sure that your ferrets are in a secure spot if you, other family members or friends are entering or leaving your home.

I hope that you enjoy your new pets. Consider checking for ferret shelters or clubs in your area where you can obtain your pets and give a needy ferret or two a good home. Ferret shelters and clubs are also a good source of additional information and offer camaraderie with other ferret owners.