

Listless And Suffering Bouts Of Diarrhea

A ferret that received treatment for diarrhea still seems sick and is developing more signs of illness.

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Q: I have a female ferret that is about 4 to 5 years old. She occasionally gets diarrhea, but she's had it for the last three weeks. I took her to the vet's two weeks ago, and they gave her an antibiotic. Now the diarrhea is back and worse. Also, when she walks, she swaggers, almost like a drunk person. She used to be able to stand up on her back legs for a treat, but she doesn't do that anymore. She also has been lethargic lately. My ferret that normally runs around nonstop will now lay listlessly in my lap for 30 minutes with her eyes half-closed. What could this be?

A: It sounds like your ferret is sick enough to need another visit to your veterinarian. From your description, your ferret's strength and nutrition are being sapped by the diarrhea. Once a ferret has prolonged diarrhea, important fluids and electrolytes leave the body and are not available to be absorbed. This can make a ferret very weak and lethargic. If it goes on long, it becomes a vicious cycle — the ferret becomes too weak to eat or drink properly, he or she loses more nutrients via the diarrhea, and it becomes even weaker. Eventually, the ferret becomes prone to secondary infections that could prove to be fatal.

Diagnosing the cause of diarrhea can be very difficult in almost any patient. Sometimes veterinarians start with antibiotic treatment in case a bacterial infection is the cause of the diarrhea. This is called making a diagnosis by a "response to treatment." If the ferret is not better in about three to five days of antibiotic treatment, it is time to speak to your veterinarian. It may be that bacteria are not the cause for the diarrhea.

At this point, it is important to return to your veterinarian. If your doctor is unwilling to try a different approach to this problem, get a second opinion on the cause of the diarrhea.

To try to help your ferret, it is likely some tests will need to be performed. It sounds as if medication alone is not improving the health of your ferret. Some of the tests might include a complete blood count, a biochemistry panel, fecal cultures and radiographs. If not properly treated and controlled, diarrhea can be fatal in a ferret, so the sooner you do something for your ferret, the better she will be.