

Ferret's Eating Habits Change Drastically

Is a ferret's change in behavior and eating habits a sign of a problem?

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Q: My 3.5-year-old male ferret is not himself. A few days ago he appeared to be choking on something, but he stopped after a few seconds. I kept a close eye on him after that, monitoring his habits. He didn't appear to be pooping, he wasn't eating or drinking.

I thought he could have a blockage, so I gave him the recommended amounts of a ferret-specific laxative, and he started pooping again. His poop wasn't as regular, but he was going. It still seems like he is having a hard time going half of the time, but he doesn't seem to be in any pain. When he does poop, it is irregular, varying from normal to thin to very loose but not watery. It always looks brown.

I started putting the laxative in his water bowl because he wasn't using the bottle, but he is now drinking on his own, though not as much as he should.

His eating habits used to be very regular, and have been very strange over the past few days. He wouldn't eat his food, even with his favorite treat on it (Ferretone). It is the same food he has been eating for almost a year, and the ingredients haven't changed. I tried hand-feeding, but he took the piece, moved it to the other side of the cage and left it there. I tried a commercially made duck soup, but he only took a few licks.

I noticed yesterday morning that he ate at some point last night, but he hasn't touched food since. This morning I gave him a piece of food and he ate it, so I continued to give him pieces, and made a small pile in front of him on the floor, which he ate. I can tell he is hungry and losing weight, but he will not eat out of his bowl, and only ate that one small food pile. He also looks like he is having difficulty eating. When he chews, he looks like he is tucking his head under his right leg, and it looks like chewing is a little painful for him.

He has been sleeping a lot more than usual.

When I let him out to play, he is very active as usual. He plays, dooks and runs around like a normal ferret. He will, however, disappear for longer periods than usual. When I look for him, he is usually under the futon or behind the couch, lying flat.

Am I just being paranoid, or could there be something wrong?

A: No, this sounds like there is something that is bothering your little guy. If there is one thing you can say about ferrets, no matter how sick they are, they try to eat. Because your ferret is not eating well, he is not defecating normally. And whatever is bothering him is also changing his normal activity such that he is lethargic.

Visit your veterinarian as soon as possible. Ferrets have such a fast metabolism and so little body fat, that they can only go a short time without eating properly. Your ferret might have a severe toothache, such as caused by an infected tooth root or a fractured tooth. Or this may be a problem related to further down the gastrointestinal tract. Maybe he has developed ulcerations. Maybe he has an infection. Finally, there are systemic illnesses that can make a ferret so sick, he stops eating properly. So, the best advice I can give you is to visit your ferret's veterinarian right away and have some testing done to get to the bottom of this problem.

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