

A Ferret Struggles With Epizootic Catarrhal Enteritis, Or ECE

What is the best way to treat a ferret with ECE if a ferret-knowledgeable veterinarian isn't nearby?

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Q: I just lost one of my ferrets to epizootic catarrhal enteritis (ECE), and my other ferret is also sick with it. He is on Metronidazole and Pepto Bismol. He is more than 4 years old and seems to have normal poo one minute and then runny the next. He is not eating like he should, so we also give him convalescence support food from the vet's via syringe when he won't eat at all. How long can this go on for? When we first had the ferrets two years ago they had this ECE, and I was led to think that they don't get it twice. The only thing I can think of is they lost their old buddy and they started then with ECE. Is it stress? I've no one to ask advice from. My veterinarians are good but don't deal with many ferrets; we have really put them to the test just lately. My ferret is a fussy eater at the best of times, so now he has gone off boiled chicken. When he did eat a bit, he got tummy acid. What do I do or give him for the best? I can't lose him also.

A: I'm very sorry to hear about the loss of your ferret. The most important aspect to the continued health of your ferret is to find a veterinarian who understands ferrets, knows how to take blood from ferrets and interpret the results, and can treat your ferret properly.

I know that not all ferret owners are lucky enough to have a ferret-savvy veterinarian nearby. Ferret medicine is only taught in a very small number of veterinary schools and, sadly, we are graduating veterinarians without the skills necessary to help your ferrets. This is one reason it can be so difficult for you to find a veterinarian who can understand the medical needs of your ferret. If you cannot find someone in your area who is knowledgeable about ferrets, then find a veterinarian who can access veterinarian-only websites and seek advice from other veterinarians. Such a service has been available for almost 20 years. And there are other venues available to your veterinarian. You must find a veterinarian who can help your ferret in this way if you do not have a ferret-knowledgeable veterinarian in your area.

As to ECE in ferrets, yes, ferrets can break with it multiple times after going through a bout of it. Most only show signs once, but some ferrets have it recur. In almost all ferrets with ECE, the disease is self-limiting and is easily controlled with some antibiotics and supportive care. In rare cases, there is so much liver damage and/or dehydration from this disease, that ferret has a difficult time recovering and requires intense care in the hospital. Despite this, some ferrets do not make it.

In the case of your ferret, it is important to find out if the diagnosis is truly ECE again. And if it is, how healthy or unhealthy is your ferret's liver? You might need supportive care based on how diseased the liver is at this point.

The most important thing right now is to find a veterinarian who understands ferrets, can do diagnostic testing and base treatment on the specific disease your ferret has.

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