

Are Allergies To Blame For A Ferret Refusing To Explore?

Could allergies cause a ferret to stay in his cage instead of playing?

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Q: We have a male ferret (3.5 years old) that appears to have developed allergies. We believed he had caught the flu (lethargy, sneezing) about a month ago, so we took him to his veterinarian, who gave him antibiotics to start, then later he was placed on Benadryl and a steroid. He had X-rays and an ultrasound to rule out anything internal.

He does not seem to be lethargic any longer, but refuses to be a ferret (play, roam, explore). He comes out to eat and drink, but as soon as he actually decides to step away from his cage, he gives his body a good shake and his tail puffs out. He then returns to his cage and lies in his bed. This has been going on now for about three weeks. We also recently just moved into a new home (renting). We have moved four times in the past and this has never occurred, so environmental stress does not seem likely.

He has also started to shed really bad. I know he could be getting in his winter coat, but it seems like it's one thing after another. I even steam-cleaned the carpets again without chemicals to see if this would help, but he still reacts when we put out him on the ground. We also have a female ferret that has no reaction at all to the move, etc. She is having a blast in our new home, and I just wish our boy could have the same experience. We are at our wit's end. Any information, ideas, etc. would be greatly appreciated.

A: I agree with you, these are very unusual signs and not something that we see every day. Ferrets, as far as we can tell, rarely suffer environmental allergies. It is just not a ferret thing to do! It is possible they can become hypersensitive to something in the environment and require an antihistamine, but that is a rare occurrence in ferrets.

I definitely recommend returning to your veterinarian's office and letting the veterinarian know that your ferret is not himself. When you go to the office, you'll have several topics to possibly discuss.

First, is it possible that there was some permanent damage to your ferret's respiratory system from the flu? Could it be that he cannot take in enough oxygen to be his lively, playful self? Your veterinarian can make this judgment by listening to your ferret's chest, looking in his mouth and measuring the level of oxygen in the blood.

Second, is it possible your ferret is being slowed down by an early insulinoma? The blood glucose level may be just low enough that he only wants to be in his bed but not so low that he looks terribly sick. My guess is that this is an early insulinoma, and a simple blood glucose test by your veterinarian can give you a quick answer.

Finally, the hair loss is something to be concerned about. I can see how it may appear to be more of an allergic reaction, but I am suspicious of adrenal gland disease.

Are all of these signs connected? Possibly. But because your veterinarian has not seen your ferret in a few weeks and because this is an ongoing problem, it is a good idea to have your ferret re-checked by his veterinarian to get to the bottom of this before your ferret gets any sicker.

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