

## Ferret Eats Its Owner's Medication

### What is the treatment when a ferret eats its owner's medicine?

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**Q:** I have been meticulous about "ferret-proofing" my home. Unfortunately, my 3-year-old ferret, Salvador Dali, came across a bright red pill in the bathroom and promptly chomped it down. I retrieved a small uneaten piece of it, and the distinctive color makes me think I have a 99-percent chance I've identified it. I can only think it was a stray pill I dropped accidentally, one I take for allergies. It is pseudoephedrine hydrochloride, a 30 mg tablet. I'm careful with it because it raises blood pressure and effectively caffeinates me.

I saw none of these effects in Dali. Instead, he was laid low for a good four days, barely moved, wouldn't eat or drink, and I was afraid he wouldn't survive. I had to take him to my vet to get him hydrated, among other treatments. All told, this cost me about \$325. Don't misunderstand, I would've spent whatever necessary to heal him. But the cost was not in my budget.

Can you diagnose possible effects of this drug on a small animal such as Dali? His reaction seems counter-intuitive to me. Is there any at-home treatment I might have tried to ease his discomforts?

**A:** A pet ferret eating an owner's medication is a common occurrence. It happens more frequently than you may imagine, mostly for the reason you just wrote about. The pill bottles are safely stored, but ferrets find that stray pill that falls on the floor or between the seat cushions; before you know it, they have ingested medication that is not appropriate for ferrets and potentially at 100 times a ferret dose.

It is usually difficult to predict what will happen next to the ferret. Very, very few of the thousands of medications that are designed for people have been tested on ferrets. For that reason, it's impossible to predict how medication used in one species will work in another species. For example, one very popular antibiotic for animals can never be used in people, because it causes severe neurologic symptoms in people but is extremely safe in animals.

Pseudoephedrine is a medication that has no known use in ferrets, and so we have no data on how it reacts in the ferret's body. And when a ferret ingests a dose that is 50 to 100 times what you would give to a 1 kilogram animal, it is impossible to know why your ferret reacted like it did.

Why do drugs cause different effects in different species? There are many reasons. Some are due to the metabolic processes of the patient, and some are due to the inherent properties of the drug itself. Therefore, occasionally one species will metabolize a drug faster than another species, so it leaves the system quicker than predicted compared to another species. Or the receptors necessary for the medication to work properly are present in one species and not the other species; or the receptors may be present, but they are present in different quantities. Finally, the medication is absorbed from the intestinal tract at different rates in different species.

If this were to happen again, visit your veterinarian as soon as possible. The cost of the treatment your ferret needs might be less if treated sooner. Your veterinarian has treatment that can limit the absorption of the medication so the side effects that you observed would never have occurred.

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