

How Ferrets Age To Perfection

Bob Church discusses the changes to expect in ferrets as they age.

By Bob Church

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Popeye, like all ferrets, experienced many changes in his life as he aged.

Like shooting stars, ferrets live fast and bright lives. Many ferrets live for only six or seven years, more than that becomes a rare occurrence. A number of reasons account for the short life span, but the paramount one is simply that ferrets are not designed to live very long. The consequence of a shortened ferret life span is that owners face changing husbandry needs as their pet ages. Changes in behavior, playfulness and mobility are common and to be expected. Disease becomes more common, especially dental disease and various benign and malignant tumors.

Popeye is a 7-year-old chocolate sable and my good friend. He got his name because his right eye opened two days before his left. I allowed him to go through two ruts before being neutered. His first rut occurred before he was a year old, so I allowed the second so his skeleton would have time to mature. Consequently, he was very large and muscular for most of his life. The changes that occurred to Popeye as he aged are a good representation of what many people can expect as their own ferrets age.

Ferret Aging Stages

Ferrets progress through several stages of life, which I break down into five distinctive phases: 1) the newborn kit (neonate period); 2) the older kit (childhood period); 3) the juvenile kit (adolescent period); 4) the adult (adult period); and 5) the geriatric adult (senescent period). A ferret's early life is marked with physical growth, its middle age is defined by physical maintenance and its older period is marked with physical decline.

Several things can influence aging. Ferrets don't smoke, but secondhand smoke can accelerate the aging process. Diet can profoundly impact aging, as can disease, stress, and even physical conditions of the environment. It is more than possible that inappropriate husbandry can put ferrets on a fast track that can shorten their life span by several years.

Changes To Play

As ferrets get older, they play less — a natural part of the aging process. A lot of older ferrets also become less social. However, these changes could also be caused by disease, including undiagnosed insulinoma, so be wary.

Popeye still plays, but he doesn't initiate it as much. I physically play with him at least twice a day, tickling him until he wrestles, bounces off and I give chase. I stop when he loses interest or tires.

Changes To Diet

As ferrets get older, changes in diet may become important because of pancreatic problems (insulinoma), food allergies (inflammatory bowel disease), dental problems (worn or missing teeth), skeletal problems (joint pain or osteoporosis), or metabolic changes. It is critical for owners to work with a veterinarian to fine-tune a ferret's diet. Don't make changes without a veterinarian's approval; ferrets are small and bad things can happen very rapidly when altering their diet.

Popeye required few dietary changes. Based on my veterinarian's recommendations and an increase in Popeye's arthritis, a normal aspect of aging, I added a supplement to increase the health of Popeye's cartilage. Also, his teeth require more frequent cleaning because they are more worn. Otherwise, he just eats a bit less.

Changes To Weight

Ferrets generally weigh the most when they're between adolescence and adulthood. Also, neutered ferrets lose bone and muscle mass over time, with females generally losing more bone mass and males losing more muscle mass. If the ferret — male or female — eats a diet that does not require a great deal of chewing effort, the muscles on the top and sides of the head will atrophy. This is why a lot of older ferrets seem to have a sort of concavity on the top of their head.

After castration, Popeye lost muscle mass over several years. As Popeye aged, he stopped putting on as much seasonal body fat, so he gradually lost more weight. This year, he lost weight for no apparent reason, so X-rays were taken. We discovered that he had a cracked canine that caused discomfort and anorexia. When that was treated successfully, he

started to eat again.

I have added a few calorie-dense treats to Popeye's diet to increase his body fat index. Popeye likes egg yolks and chicken fat, but lactose-free cream or fatty meats would work just as well. A lot of evidence shows that carbohydrate tolerance in most mammals decreases with age, and because ferrets are particularly prone to insulinoma, it is a good idea not to give older ferrets sugary treats.

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