

When Ferrets Bite

Discover why ferrets bite and how to make them stop.

By Rebecca Sweat

At first, it all seems innocent enough. You get home from work, kick off your shoes and let your ferret out of its cage. A few minutes later, you're standing at the stove and stirring the soup you'll eat for dinner.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, your ferret sneaks up from behind, attacks your feet and nips at your toes. It's never done anything like that before, and it was just a nip, so you don't think much of it.

But then it happens again the next day and the day after that. A couple days pass, and your pet bites your toes a fourth time, but this time it draws blood.

The following day, you pick up your ferret and it bites into your finger and makes it bleed. Boy, did that hurt! But even worse, you can't help feeling bad that your fur buddy seems to have developed a dislike for you.

Something's got to be done. You thumb through the phone book and find out that a new therapist has opened an office in Ferret Town. Maybe she can help turn this situation around. Luckily for you, she can see you right away.

During your appointment, the therapist starts out by explaining the two main categories of ferret bites. Nibbles and nips are often playful or accidental and usually do not leave a mark on the skin. The deliberate, hard bite, which typically results in a puncture wound, is a much more serious situation. A ferret might bite for many reasons, but most biting behavior falls under one of these two general headings.

Nibbles and Nips

Nibbling and nipping can be common in kits. "Young ferrets investigate their environment with their mouth," said New Hampshire veterinarian Michael Dutton. "If they see something, and they don't know what it is, they'll nibble on it. It's like, 'Oh, what's this? I don't know. Let me bite it a little and see if it moves.'"

Sometimes the "object" the ferret is exploring is a human toe sticking out of a sock or moving fingers on a human hand. Because ferrets do not have opposable thumbs or sharp claws, the best way they know to retrieve the "object" of interest is with their teeth.

Kits also nip at each other when they play to establish a social order, according to Kellie Henisa, a ferret owner and veterinary technician in Indianapolis. "When ferrets play, they are usually very rough with each other," she said. "The biting and rough play determines where each ferret is placed among that order." When you play with your ferret, it may nip at you just like it would with one of its littermates, Henisa says.

It's worth noting that the ferret's skin is thicker and tougher than human skin, so when ferrets nip at each other in play, they don't inflict any real pain. But when they nip at a human, it can hurt. "Your ferret doesn't understand the difference," said Bruce Williams, DVM, staff veterinary pathologist at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology and a leading authority on ferrets. "It doesn't understand, when it nips at you in play just like it would nip another ferret, why you are reacting differently."

The skin on the back of a ferret's neck is especially tough. During play, a ferret might jump on the back of another ferret, grab its nape and shake it until the ferret is dragged off. This behavior will not hurt a ferret, but it can definitely be painful if your ferret applies the same maneuver to a fleshy part of your hand.

Ferrets of any age might nip at people for other reasons, as well. A ferret might accidentally bite your finger or foot when it meant to grab the toy the two of you were playing with. Or, sometimes ferrets will walk over to their owners and nip them on the ankles or toes to signal they want to play. It's the ferret's way of saying: "Get off the couch. Let's do something. I'm ready for some fun."

If your ferret nips you because it wants to play, that's a very real need. Ferrets need one-on-one interaction with their owners, especially if they are single-kept pets. If your ferret doesn't get the time with you it needs or wants, it may start demanding it by nipping at you.

Playing with your ferret is also important in terms of exercise. Ferrets need time outside their cage each day so that they can run, jump and burn up energy. Keeping your ferret caged for too many hours can really make it edgy. When you finally do open the cage door to let your ferret out or to put in fresh food and water, your ferret might nip at you out of sheer boredom or frustration from being cooped up for so long.

A ferret might also nip in response to certain smells. "Ferrets can be very finicky about various odors," noted Pam Troutman, founder and director of Shelters That Adopt & Rescue Ferrets (STAR*). "Their noses are very sensitive, and we can set them off with what is to them strong, unfamiliar or unpleasant smells."

A particular cologne or perfume, hand lotion, soap, hair spray, or nail polish that you use might repulse your ferret. After using one of these products, your pet might nip you if you try to pick it up. That's its way of saying, "Please go away. You stink!" Different ferrets find different products offensive.

Finally, some ferrets nip when they're hungry. Your ferret might nip you when you're lying down to tell you it wants you to get up and serve some food. Or you may have finished eating dinner, and your ferret wants to lick some of the meat juice or gravy off your arm or hand. When most of the taste is gone, it might nip at your hand to try to get more of that good flavor.

Biting for Real

A hard, purposeful bite is a whole different story. Usually a hard bite is a sign of a serious problem related to the ferret's physical condition, its cage or household environment, or the relationship between the ferret and its owners.

The ferret might have teeth or gum problems, or suffer from a back injury, arthritis, a broken bone or a life-threatening illness, such as cancer. It's not much different from the human who isn't feeling well and might become crabby as a result.

"If the ferret's leg is injured and the owner touches it — even if it's by accident — the ferret's probably going to turn around and bite him or her," Dutton said.

Another cause of biting is hormonal fluctuations. "If an intact male or female ferret is in season, it might bite," Williams said. "Part of the mating ritual is for the male ferret to climb on the back of the female, grab her by the neck, and they might drag each other around with their teeth. If your ferret is in season, there's an increased chance that it might try to demonstrate the same behavior on you."

Ferrets with adrenal disease have excess levels of sex hormones, which make them feel as if they're in season, Williams adds. These ferrets, too, tend to bite.

Biting can also be a result of stress. Any change in the ferret's environment or routine could create anxiety for the ferret and make it act aggressively. A new spouse or baby, longer working hours for an owner, the addition of another ferret or other pet, and a new home can all make a ferret feel stressed and cantankerous.

More often than not, though, ferrets bite hard because they are afraid and are trying to protect themselves. "Young ferrets left in a pet shop and not being handled correctly, or not at all, would bite out of fear and insecurity," noted Angela Espinet, founder of the South Florida Ferret Club and Rescue. It could be that misbehaving children poked and teased the ferret, and that gave the ferret a negative impression of people.

If you adopted an adult ferret, it may have had a previous owner who abused or neglected it. As a result, that ferret might distrust all people and bite anyone who appears to be a threat.

Preventing Nips and Bites

Take steps to prevent biting of any kind. Even playful nips from a kit, as harmless as they might seem, could become a problem down the road. "If your ferret is not taught what actions are acceptable, then things could escalate as the pet grows older," Troutman warned.

Roughhousing with a kit might seem fun while its teeth are tiny and its bites painless. But, this play activity instills bad habits for the long run. "Adult ferret teeth puncture human skin very easily," Troutman said, "and although the ferret means no harm, because it was taught to play like that, it could create problems—especially if children live in the house."

One of the best ways to prevent bites is by reading your ferret's body language to gauge its mood. "You need to know when to back off and leave your ferret alone," said Tara Palaski, secretary of the American Ferret Association and director

of the Pennsylvania Ferret Rescue Association.

Watch out for an arched back, bristled fur, front feet splayed out or a ferret jumping from side to side while backing away and hissing. Sometimes a ferret will lick another ferret or a person intently just prior to delivering a bite. If you observe any of these body signals, either put the ferret down or try to distract it by offering it a toy or food treat.

You also need to know what situations bring out the worst in your pet. Be a good observer. Try to figure out what ticks it off. Once you know, you can avoid situations where your ferret is likely to bite. For instance, if your ferret tends to attack hands during play, use a fishing-pole-style of toy or roll balls on the floor rather than rolling your pet over and tickling its belly.

“Set your ferret up to succeed,” Palaski said. “You want to be able to praise good behavior, not just correct bad behavior.” Take the lead, and initiate games that bring out the right kind of behavior in your ferret. Then praise it and offer food rewards. Play with your ferret every day. If you don’t, it might fill up all its free time devising games like “bite the toes sticking out from the blanket” — which you don’t want played.

Other tips: Don’t stick your fingers through the wires of the cages no matter how tempting the ferret’s cute face is; your pet may think your finger is a chew toy or treat. Avoid giving your ferret treats on your finger until it’s old enough to know where the treat ends and your finger starts. Don’t let children hold or touch your ferret in your absence. Never hand your ferret to someone who is afraid; if your ferret senses fear, it may react with a nip.

Last but not least, training aids such as bitter apple or other bitter products can also help in discouraging a ferret from biting, according to Troutman. Bitter extract products come in sprays or creams and are available at most pet stores. If you’ve got a nippy kit, spray some bitter extract on your hands before handling it. This will make your hands a much less tempting target for nips.

Correcting Biting Problems

What if your ferret seriously bites you or someone else? Immediately correct your ferret. The best way to do this is to scruff your ferret by the neck and say in a firm tone, “No!” Then you can either distract it with something to play with or return it to its cage to calm down.

If you’re holding your ferret and it bites you because it wants to get down, you should not let it down. “If you do, you’ll only be rewarding him for biting you because you are giving him what he wants,” Williams said. Even though your finger might hurt or even bleed a little, keep holding your ferret and don’t release it until it calms down.

“There are going to be times when you don’t want your ferret to get down — for its safety,” Williams said. “Maybe there’s a strange dog in the area or some other type of danger in the room. You need to be able to keep holding your ferret until it is safe to set him down again.”

To make your corrections work, deliver them the instant your ferret bites you. Don’t wait until after you’ve put your ferret back in its cage and it’s doing something else. Be consistent by correcting your ferret every time it bites. Don’t let it get away with nipping you even once; if you do, it will remember that it got away with it before and might try nipping you again in the future.

Avoid slapping your ferret or flicking its nose to “punish” it for biting you. Doing so will only create worse problems. It will make your ferret leery of your hand and bring on even more biting. “If a ferret is biting out of aggression, hitting it will only encourage more aggression,” Palaski said. “If he is biting out of fear, this will only create more fear. If he is biting out of hunger or frustration, you are punishing him for something he has no control over.”

You can do severe damage to your ferret by striking it, such as flicking it on the nose. “It might cause bodily harm to the ferret, from physical deformity to neurological defects and even death,” Henisa said.

Probably the most important step in solving a biting problem is determining its cause. If your ferret hasn’t had a physical in a while, schedule a veterinary exam to rule out a medical reason behind its biting behavior. If your ferret always nips you after you wash your hands with liquid soap, try switching to another brand or a different scent.

If your ferret has faced radical changes in its routine or a stressful situation at home, see if you can do something to alleviate some of the ferret’s stress. Maybe you’ve been working a lot of overtime, and your ferret just feels lonely and needs a little more attention from you.

If your ferret is biting because it's afraid of you (or people in general), that is going to take a little more work. "Showing excessive amounts of love will work wonders to turn the situation around," Espinet said. One idea is to spend an hour or so every night with your ferret in a small room with the door closed.

"Sit in the middle of the floor, and allow the ferret to walk all over you while offering a food treat, such as a little chicken baby-food," Espinet suggested. Don't try to force the ferret to interact with you. Don't reach out to it or try to touch it. Just sit there and talk softly to it. Let the ferret call the shots.

"This will encourage the ferret to equate kindness with trust," Espinet said. "With consistent attention the ferret will look forward to these times of loving interaction and will soon learn to trust again." Eventually your ferret will come to see that you are not a threat.

"Ferrets who haven't been handled or were handled badly require extra patience, understanding and a knowledge of why they are biting in order to help them," Palaski said. She has dealt with several ferrets with biting problems over the past six years of running a shelter and has never come across a ferret that could not be rehabilitated with enough love and time.

"It takes a lot of time to earn a fearful ferret's trust," Palaski said. "You cannot expect or demand quick solutions or progress. It may take days, weeks and even months to earn their trust enough to start really working on the behavior issue. When the day comes that the scared little ferret happily comes to you for treats, cuddles and playtime, it is the most rewarding experience I know of."

Who could disagree with that? You love your little furball and you want the best for it. It's your companion and you're not going to give up on it just because it does a few things you don't like. It may take some time to figure out exactly why your ferret's biting and to get it to stop, but you've decided you're going to do everything you can to remedy the situation. After all, your ferret's worth it.

First Aid For Bites

If you are bitten by a ferret, take the same steps as you would with any other wound. Whenever your skin is pierced, you are at-risk of getting a bacterial infection, so thoroughly wash the wound with soap and warm water.

You may also want to apply an antibacterial ointment or an antiseptic, such as rubbing alcohol or hydrogen peroxide (this will sting). "When the hydrogen peroxide bubbles up, it physically lifts the debris and bacteria out of the wound," noted Bruce Williams, DVM, staff veterinary pathologist at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology in Washington, D.C.

Bite wounds are not normally stitched up — even when they're deep punctures, according to Williams. "You have to consider any animal bite contaminated with bacteria, and you never stitch those wounds," he said. "If you did, you'd be sealing in the bacteria."

Whether to see a doctor is a judgement call on your part. If it's a minor bite wound, most people are OK just cleaning the wound out and disinfecting it themselves at home. "Most ferret bites to healthy individuals heal uneventfully," stated Freddie Ann Hoffman, MD, a pediatrician in Mountain Lakes, N.J.

The bitten person may need additional care in the case of a deep puncture, red or swollen wounds or immunocompromised systems from cancer, HIV infection, diabetes, chemotherapy, etc. Such cases require examination by a physician, who most likely will prescribe antibiotics.

Two Final Steps You Should Take:

1) Check your medical records to make sure you're up-to-date on your tetanus vaccinations. If you're not, you may want to take a trip to the emergency room to get a tetanus booster.

2) If someone else's ferret bit you, make sure it has been vaccinated for rabies.

"Most ferret owners do vaccinate their pets, and in that case the animal would just need to be examined by a veterinarian, quarantined at home and then reexamined after a period of time," Williams said. "At the end of the quarantine time, in all probability the animal will be pronounced free of rabies." The chances of getting rabies from a ferret are infinitesimal, he adds.

As long as you thoroughly clean out the wound, the chance of getting a bacterial infection is also very low, Hoffman says. After doing an exhaustive search of medical literature, she did not find a single reported case where a ferret bite resulted in

a serious or life-threatening infection.

Ferrets and Rabies

People bitten by a ferret often start worrying about getting rabies. In most cases, though, they have very little reason to worry. The majority of pet ferrets are kept indoors all the time, which really limits the chance for exposure to rabies. To become infected with rabies, a pet ferret would have to be exposed to rabid wild animals or come in contact with other indoor animals that have been outdoors.

“It is very difficult for ferrets to contract rabies and even more difficult for ferrets to pass it on to a person,” said Mike Dutton, DVM, a veterinarian in private practice in New Hampshire with a special interest in ferrets. “The virus must pass through the saliva, and there has been only one case to my knowledge where the virus has been found in the ferret’s saliva.”

Ferret owners are generally good about vaccinating their ferrets against rabies, even though there is very little chance of pet ferrets coming in contact with rabies.

Several years ago the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta issued a statement saying that the risk of getting rabies from a ferret is far less than that of getting it from a dog, cat, rabbit or fox. In fact, since 1954, the CDC reported fewer than 25 documented cases of rabies in ferrets.

In recent years, the CDC has conducted considerable research on ferrets and rabies. Five separate experiments conducted by the CDC showed that ferrets might contract rabies, but they cannot pass it on to another animal or human. They die from the infection before they can become carriers. “This is in stark contrast to dogs and cats,” Freddie Ann Hoffman, MD, a pediatrician in Mountain Lakes, N.J. said, “both of which are known ‘carriers’ of rabies and able to pass on the infection through a bite wound.”