

## Ferret Nutrition

**These lithe critters require high-quality dietary meat protein.**

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Ferrets are strict carnivores and belong to the family Mustelidae. They have short digestive tracts, and food passes from one end to the other in about three to four hours. Ferrets have a minimum protein requirement of 32 percent, which, when combined with the short amount of time the food is in the intestinal tract, necessitates high-quality dietary meat protein. Plant proteins are not utilized by ferrets.

In addition, ferrets have a high fat requirement, around 20 to 30 percent. Ferrets use fat as their main energy source. They are poor digesters of fiber and cannot use carbohydrates effectively for energy.

Feed your ferret a dry ration as its primary diet; dry food is more energy efficient than canned food and is better for the teeth and gums. The food you choose should have at least 32- to 40-percent protein and 20-percent fat. Several brands of high-quality food designed for kittens work well. Several brands of dry food designed specifically for the ferret are also suitable. Some people recommend mixing two or more types of kitten or ferret foods together to ensure a "complete" ration.

Because ferrets pass food through their bodies at a rapid rate, they need to eat frequently. Obesity is rarely a problem. Allow the ferret access to dry food at all times in a heavy crock-type bowl or a hanging feeder. One study indicated that the higher the corn content of the diet, the more likely ferrets were to develop bladder stones. Corn is commonly used as a filler for many pet foods. There is still some controversy in the scientific community over the exact dietary ration that should be used for the ferret.

Ferrets may be fed meat scraps and eggs as treats. Because ferrets are carnivores by nature, these are healthy snacks to offer. Although ferrets appear to be resistant to the development of salmonella infections, it is probably wise to cook these foods prior to feeding. These foods can be fed in the amount of 1 to 2 tablespoons per day. Some ferrets enjoy bits of fruit and vegetables, such as green peppers, bananas, cucumbers and melons. Feed no more than 1 teaspoon per day of a fruit or vegetable.

Foods such as breads, breakfast cereals, cakes and cookies should not be fed. Many of these items contain refined sugars, which can cause damage to the ferret's pancreas, resulting in diabetes. Unfortunately, ferrets love sweet foods and may beg for these treats, but you take a serious risk with your pet's health in offering them.

As mentioned, the ferret has a high fat requirement, and you may need to add a fatty acid supplement to its food. If the coat is dry or brittle in your otherwise healthy pet that is already eating a high-quality kitten or ferret food, you might try adding between 1/8 and 1/4 teaspoon of a fatty acid supplement per day. If your pet's coat is already shiny and thick, this supplement is not necessary. Ferrets with hair loss, excessive itchiness of the skin, scabs or other lesions, or those with dry coats that do not respond within two weeks to a fatty acid supplement, should be examined by a veterinarian.

Ferrets have a tendency to develop hairballs, particularly if more than 1 year old. Unlike cats, ferrets do not vomit these masses of hair and can develop intestinal obstructions or become severely debilitated. To lubricate the hair and keep it moving out of the stomach before it forms a large mass, give the ferret about 1 inch or 1/4 teaspoon of a cat hairball laxative every three days. Ferrets generally love the taste of this sticky substance.