

## Fresh Water For A Healthy Ferret

**Clean, fresh water and a good water container are crucial to your ferret's health.**

*By Alicia Drakiotes*

Ferret Missy Pooh/© Courtesy Barbara Roach  
Water isn't just for play or bathing, it's an important part of a ferret's diet.

No living mammals flourish on Earth without water. Water is essential for growth, healthy development and, ultimately, for life. Your ferret gives you a lifetime of unconditional love, loyalty and friendship. In return, she or he counts on you to provide food, water, safe shelter, regular veterinary care, exercise, companionship and more.

Through informed decisions you can make the best choices to keep your pet ferret(s) happy and healthy with the cleanest and freshest water sources available. But choosing and providing good water isn't the end of your work. You also need to provide and maintain proper water containers.

### The Basics

Most loving, good-hearted ferret owners spend a lot of time and energy making sure their pets have a healthy diet. They compare food brands, read labels, debate feeding styles and consult with their veterinarians. However, they sometimes forget that an ever-present bowl or bottle of clean water may be the most important part of their ferret's diet.

In pets, as in people, water makes up the majority of the body (about 80 percent). By allowing substances to dissolve and to be carried throughout the body, water provides a basis for nearly all of the processes and chemical reactions that keep the body running. Water helps in the digestive and circulatory processes and helps the body to filter out waste. Dehydration or lack of water can cause serious problems, including heart and kidney damage.

Many ferrets and other smaller pets are caged for many hours. They have no escape from this environment if it is hot, becomes wet or becomes urine- or feces-filled. You, as a ferret caretaker, must be responsible for providing a safe, clean and healthy place for your ferrets to live. A cage left in the sun, a leaking or empty water bottle, or soiled, ammonia-filled litter can be deadly.

Fulfilling your ferret's fresh water requirements is not difficult. A general rule is to provide one fourth of a liter of fresh water per pound of body weight per animal per day. A healthy ferret will drink enough water to keep itself hydrated.

If you worry that your pet is not drinking enough water and you see signs of illness, such as depression or sunken eyes, or if you can scruff the fur at the base of the neck and the skin does not spring back, take your ferret to the veterinarian. He or she can administer intravenous fluids and find out what caused the problem.

### Cleaning Pros & Cons

Obviously we need to keep the water bowls and bottles clean so our beloved pets do not fall ill. The water bowl or water bottle needs to be cleaned each day. Bacteria that you cannot see can grow in a bottle or bowl, giving the water a strange taste and discouraging your pet from drinking. Get in the habit of washing your pet's bowl with warm soap and water each morning and, after a thorough rise, fill it with fresh cool water. If there is build up or a ring around the container, remove it by using baking soda and/or vinegar.

"Fresh water is a must," said Jane Kreuter of New York. "By the time I get home from work and the water has been sitting for 10 hours, they are looking for fresh and cold. And they run to the fresh water like I have given them a glass of merlot!"

Water bottles can be particularly difficult to clean. Using a long narrow brush such as a baby's bottle brush that fits through the bottle neck will help to clean the inside. If left unclean for several days a skim of algae will form inside the bottle. There are also some wonderful wide-neck water bottles on the market that make cleaning the bottle much easier.

Do not use bleach for general cleaning of water bowls or bottles. Too many times residue from the bleach gets into the water and then into the ferret's digestive system. This can cause extreme illness and even death, as it is caustic and will burn the ferret's mouth, stomach lining, esophagus and intestinal tissue.

### When Water Is Not Water

Not all waters are the same. We have many choices in filling the water bottles or bowls: tap, distilled, bottled or filtered. When you understand the differences in these types of water, you can provide the optimum water supply for your pets.

Tap water drawn from household faucets may contain additives, such as fluoride, chlorine, etc., from the water processing plants. It can compromise an already immune-deficient pet or person.

Distilled water is created through the distillation process (boiling the water and re-condensing the steam into liquid water). This removes all impurities, minerals (calcium, magnesium) and nutrients in the water. Distilled water should be avoided because it has the wrong ionization, pH, polarization and oxidation potentials.

If only distilled water is ingested, then the body misses getting necessary minerals. It has been tied to hair loss, which is often associated with certain mineral deficiencies. Distilled water is very advantageous, however, in the preparation of medicines and compounds.

Bottled water may be filled from a tap source or may have additives. Read the label carefully to find out.

Filtered water is usually the safest form of purchased or bottled water to offer your ferret. Fluoride and additives are filtered out leaving additive-free, yet mineral-enhanced drinking water. So, bottled spring water and filtered water are usually the best drinking options.

#### Bottle Or Bowl

Now that we've determined the best water to offer, what is the best way to offer it? The question of bottle or bowl comes up quite often. Each vessel has its own merits and both can be irreplaceable given certain circumstances.

#### H2O On The Go

1. Carry bottled water or spring water for your pet whenever traveling. You can easily fit several bottles into a bag or backpack.
2. Place a drip cup under the water bottle in the cage or carrier to keep the travel cage fresh and dry (vibration from road travel makes bottles drip).
3. Keep a collapsible bowl with you when going on walks and outings so you can pour bottled water in it for your pet. These bowls come in several styles (folding nylon, collapsing plastic) in many pet supply stores.
4. Remember when traveling (or at home) to keep the water bottle out of direct light. Sunlight shining onto the water bottle can encourage algae growth.

"I usually put out both crocks and sipper bottles," said Sandra Kudrak, DVM, DABVP, of Community Animal Hospital in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. "Some ferrets don't drink well out of one or another and, especially if they are ill or older, I prefer them to have their choice."

Kudrak provides six to eight sources of water from different types of bowls and bottles. "Some [ferrets] are really picky as to where and what they will drink." Kreuter also keeps both bottles and bowls in the cage. "[You] never know when someone might succeed in tipping the bowl," she said. The type of bowl used is also important. "One thing I swear by is a heavy marble or whatever water bowl Ñ ferrets like to try to dump the bowls and they seem to give up on these!" Kreuter added.

Placement of the bottle is another important factor. "If the spout is too low, they will not drink from it," said Danee DeVore of Virginia. "Mine seem to want it positioned so that they can lick the spout without lowering their head. They actually seem to do better if it is too high, rather than too low. The exception is after a surgery. After a surgery, I find they like to have me give them water from a dropper."

Young healthy ferrets will use a bottle easily once taught, and it is a great choice when traveling.

One advantage to bowls is that owners realize much more quickly that they need cleaning, which may make them freshen the water more often. Bowls also might be good for ill ferrets or those that prefer them, but not every situation is appropriate for using a bowl. Why? Water that sits exposed to open air in a bowl will collect tiny particles of dust, dirt and debris. After a while, the water becomes stagnant, with algae and more. Consuming the stagnant water can set up ferrets for some serious health problems. How long would a glass of water sitting on the counter seem attractive to you to drink? A few hours, overnight, a few days? You'd rather have fresh water, and so would your pet.

Besides going stagnant, the water can be contaminated with other debris. "If the smallest bit of food falls into the crock, [my ferrets] will not drink from it," said Sandra Gammage of Texas. "They have a crock on each level of the cage so they

just go and find another one. They drink much more water from the crocks than they do from the bottles, too.”

A water bottle protects the water supply from contamination. It allows pets to consume water much as it was dispensed from its original source. But just as bowls allow stagnation, make sure no algae forms inside the water bottle by cleaning and rinsing it on a regular basis.

#### Giardia

Both people and pets can develop giardiasis if they consume the Giardia protozoa. “Giardia is usually from standing water contaminated by wildlife lakes and so on,” Kudrak said. “Streams are a possibility but are actually safer.”

Pets can pick it up in any environment if feces accidentally or otherwise contaminate any drinking water.

This protozoan may take some time to show up, so if you clean up a suspected contamination, don't be surprised if you see distressed stools or even a prolapsed rectum several weeks or more after the suspected contamination. One to two percent of pets are carriers, they shed the cysts that carry this protozoan without signs of infection themselves. In a shelter or any multiple animal environments, this increases to about 10 percent.

Signs of infection by Giardia are pale, soft, foul-smelling, greasy-looking stools, weight loss and loss of appetite. A specific diagnosis may be difficult, because the cysts are shed intermittently in the stool.

I had personal experience about five years ago with kits getting giardiasis. At 4 weeks of age, mush was introduced to the sightless kits. There is always the worry that they will navigate poorly and use the mush saucer for a toilet. Regular cleanings and close observation usually avoids any Giardia infection.

This particular litter consisted of three kits. At 12 weeks of age, two of the three were adopted out. Shortly afterward, all three kits presented with prolapsed rectums. I asked the veterinarian whether this might be due to contaminated mush. It was the only solution I could think of, because there had been no new introductions of animals and they had no outdoor exposure. At the time, the veterinarian believed it was unlikely.

Fecal cultures were gathered on all three ferrets. The first round indicated nothing remarkable, but a second round of testing revealed Giardia as the culprit. I paid the vet bills on all three ferrets, purchased the medication for each household and all ferrets made a complete recovery. The lesson I learned was that it may take some time for the infection to present itself.

Other parasites can also contaminate water, such as cryptosporidium, so always offer clean, fresh water for your ferrets and prevent them from drinking at puddles, lakes or other uncontrolled water sources.

#### In, Out Or On The Road

Whether you're indoors or out, both you and your pet need access to lots of fresh water. During the summer, more water is needed, so check your pet's water supply several times a day to be sure it's full.

If you and your furry friend venture forth for the afternoon, bring plenty of bottled water for both of you. A travel cage can be paired with water bottles of many sizes, making it a great way to travel with your pet and allow it to sip at leisure. If you travel with your ferrets, bring along a supply of their regular water, as DeVore learned from her days of taking her ferrets to shows.

“When I first started showing ferrets, I would notice that the ones who went on the weekend trips would always develop diarrhea by the middle of the weekend, which would clear up on its own shortly after returning home,” DeVore said. “I figured it was stress, until a veteran show person told me it was because of the differences in tap water. This person would bring bottles of tap water from home to the shows to give her ferrets. I tried this and the diarrhea stopped. Apparently, ferrets are very sensitive to slight differences in water.”

Older ferrets or health compromised ferrets may have difficulty in obtaining enough water from bottle dispensers. In these cases it is recommended that you provide water from a bowl, but clean and refill it several times each day.

Summertime with longer days and higher heat poses a greater threat to the water supply and water bowl distribution. During these times, check you local news media to make sure that a boiling order has not been instituted. Watering pets with water that might be overrun with protozoans invites illness. Also, airborne debris and high heat can cause the water bowl to start “growing” algae and bacteria more quickly. During warm weather, ensure your pet's health by frequently cleaning and replacing its water supply.

#### Water Hater

Learn more about what you can do if your ferret refuses to drink.

[Click Here>>](#)

#### Not Just For Drinking

Water does a lot to promote health inside the body, but it has other uses too. Increasing the fun factor for enrichment is one important option. A water bowl “Needs to be deep enough to snorkel in. Drinking is not enough. They want entertainment, not just thirst quenching,” said Angela Dixon of Connecticut.

And water doesn't always need to be ingested to promote health. Water bottles provide a wonderful cool-down for extremely hot days. Fill an empty 2-liter bottle three-fourths of the way and place it into the freezer; once frozen it's a portable cooling tool. You can wrap it in a towel and place it in the cage for a ferret to sit beside or place the bottle directly on top of the cage and drape it with a towel or blanket to keep the air inside the cage cooler. This provides some relief on hot days.

#### Can't Live Without It

Personally, I believe water has a spiritual quality. We are dependent on it for life, as are all plants, trees, flowers and other living creatures. We perish without it. Water refreshes, cleanses and contributes to a wonderful life. Our world will continue to offer this treasure if we continue to ecologically care for it.

We can go far to promote good health by ensuring that we supply clean, fresh water each and every day. Cheers to a happy and healthy life for you and your ferrets!