

Ferret Nutrition Roundtable, Ferret Nutrition Question #4

Do ferrets require different foods for different life stages?

By Sandy Meyer

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KJ: A nutritionally sound ferret food should be fed to ferrets of all life stages (post-weaning) free choice.

KS: Ferrets require different levels of protein, fat and other nutrients depending on their stage of life. Providing a diet that is formulated for growing, adult and senior stages is beneficial to the animal.

LG: No. Life-stage feeding is one of many nutritional fallacies and serves only the marketing goals of producers. After nursing, the variety of foods a wild animal consumes throughout the entirety of a lifetime stays basically the same. Wild animals don't eat certain foods in their youth, transition to others in the middle years and yet again transition to a senior diet in their later years. Yet, as a whole, they experience vastly better health than domestic animals that are supposedly consuming "properly formulated" life-stage diets.

MM: Probably not. I don't think anybody has the clear, definitive answer, but let me give you the answer in this fashion. When you have a ferret in the wild, they're basically born, they nurse on the mother, when they wean, the mother hunts for them and feeds them. When that ferret is on its own, it hunts the same foods that the mother fed, because it imprints on those animals, and it pretty much hunts those same animals that it's used to when it was a baby until it dies. That's kind of a survival thing for ferrets. If they get imprinted on rabbits and mice and birds, they will tend to hunt those animals for the rest of their lives and they will hunt those things before they will hunt other things. They will only hunt those other things for a need for survival. They won't actively go out and hunt a rabbit if they've never hunted a rabbit when they were young.

One of the things that they see is the brain of a ferret is about 20 percent larger when it's a juvenile than when it's an adult, and they feel that that brain loss isn't intelligence, it's the ability to imprint on a type of food or a smell of food. So that means that ferrets are pretty much designed to eat what they eat when they are young, and they will continue to eat that for the rest of their lives.

So, the answer to your question is, there are really very few instances where you would change the diet. There might be an occasional medical issue that you've had to consult on but, on average, ferrets will eat what they eat when they're weaned until the day they die.

PR: That's debatable. My recommendation is that if you have a high enough protein content and fat content, the early life stages and your middle life stages are fine. Your later life stage is where they tend to slow down; the protein content might be a little too high, so there are senior diets that back down a little on the protein and fat. That's also for ferrets that tend to be gluttonous or maybe don't exercise much.

SW: Different foods for different life stages is hotly debated. The general consensus is extra fat and protein for young growing animals, and a reduced fat diet for elderly animals.

TW: Nutritionally, no. If you have the proper diet, one food will last throughout life. The only thing that would change that statement is feeding proportions. As the animal gets older, it lacks a lot of the enzymes that break down the food, so it need a little bit more vitamins and minerals. A lot of people cannot proportion. [They think that] if a little bit [of food] is good, then more is better I've never believed that the life-stage diets are necessary, but because people are people, it's better to have a food that if they overfeed they won't hurt the animal. And as the pet gets older, to make the food less concentrated so it won't hurt the animal.

AP: That question's kind of tough because I go by activity level. I've literally got overactive ferrets. I feed them all the baby diet. I've got a friend who just feeds active because she has active ferrets, but they're not overactive.

GS: No, but during the various life stages, a ferret might require a slightly different feeding regime. During weaning, food can be moistened with warm water until it is soft. During this time, a few dry nuggets can be introduced to convert the ferret to adult feeding. Growing ferrets need plenty of energy and nutrients to help them grow and develop. The ferret owner should feed the diet free choice (as much as the ferret will eat) to meet its nutritional needs. Adult ferrets also should be fed free choice. On average, ferrets will consume 1/2 to 3/4 cup of food each day. The pet owner needs to adjust the amount of food depending on the age, activity and environment to maintain optimum body weight. Reproducing jills need significantly more food during certain stages of pregnancy and until the kits are weaned. The pet owner should make sure the ferret is offered more than she chooses to eat during this time.

JF: Depends on the diet. I feed ours to all stages.

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Meet The Panelists

Each ferret-food manufacturer representative is identified by his or her initials.

KJ: Ken Johnson, national accounts manager at D & D Commodities Ltd.

KS: Kathy Schneider, technical services manager for Central Avian & Small Animal, a division of Kaytee Products Inc.

LG: Lucas Gillis, supervisor, office manager at Wysong Corp.

MM: Michael Massey, president of Pretty Bird International Inc.

PR: Peter Reid, president of Marshall Pet Products Inc.

SW: Stefan Wawrzynski, operations director for Brisky Pet Products

TW: Tom Willard, Ph.D., president of Totally Ferret/Performance Foods Inc.

AP: April Pietroiacovo, ferret specialist at Totally Ferret.

GS: Gail Shepherd, senior marketing manager at ZuPreem, a division of Premium Nutritional Products Inc.

JF: Jack Fallenstein, owner of Triple F Farms Inc.