

## Trick Or Treat For Ferrets

**Ferret treats without nutritional value are no treat at all.**

*By Jennifer Mons McLaughlin*

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Some ferrets might enjoy sweet treats, but owners must avoid indulging their pets because ferrets need meat-based treats.

There is something wonderful about a special treat. Celebrating with a sugar-laden dessert or indulging for a job well done is deemed acceptable behavior in society. When it comes to our ferrets, however, rewarding them with these types of treats, while once thought to be OK, is now known to lead to health problems.

“Back in the early '90s, before research on insulinoma, people were giving ferrets raisins, bananas, broccoli and even pull-n-peel licorice,” said April Pietroiacovo, ferret specialist from Totally Ferret in Broomfield, Colorado. “You can’t do that, because one raisin to a ferret is like 150 to us.”

How sugary treats affect a ferret lies in the animal's design. “The digestive tract of carnivores, including ferrets, is meant to digest higher amounts of meats and fats, and lower amounts of carbohydrates,” said Dr. Randy Wysong, founder and CEO of Wysong Corporation in Midland, Michigan. “Feeding outside of their genetic context can lead to health maladies, such as insulinoma or diabetes.”

Obviously, ferret owners would never knowingly give something that would hurt their pets, but many treats were causing more harm than good. “Then people started to get smart about all these diseases coming from sugar and said, lets cut sugar out,” Pietroiacovo said.

With more education and available information, owners now know better. Of course, owners still like to give their ferrets treats. That's OK, as long as owners follow the definition of a healthy treat.

### What Ferrets Want

“Our tendency as humans is to associate treat with candy, sugar, dessert, etc.,” Wysong said. While human bodies can handle what we deem as a special indulgence, ferrets cannot.

“The fact of the matter is, our companion animals don't need or crave sugar, flour and starch-laden treats,” Wysong said.

For optimum health, it's believed that a ferret's diet should mimic that of wild ferrets or polecats. Offering treats, which don't support that diet, doesn't benefit ferrets at all. “It's almost like offering a shark a heaping serving of broccoli. Sugar and flour — starches — are a total mismatch when it comes to ferrets and our carnivorous companion animals,” Wysong said.

Today's healthy, meat-based ferret treats not only satisfy nutritional requirements, but they taste good too. Some companies go to great lengths to make sure your fuzzies are getting the best-tasting treat they can produce.

“Every batch of every product that is made comes into my office first and I taste it,” Pietroiacovo said. “When the finished product hits my desk, I taste it and then take it over to the shelter and taste-test it on all ferrets.”

And she has gotten very good at what she does. “I can taste it and say it didn't get this or it needs this,” she said. “If I try it and it's gross, I say no way.”

This is quite an advancement if you consider that a little less than two decades ago, ferrets were given human food as treats and had no affect on what ferret treats made it to market.

“We get samples from the company that makes them for us and have the ferrets here in house [taste it] and make sure the flavor is something they like,” said Maya Janson, product marketing manager for Marshall Pet Products, Wolcott, New York. “Every treat that comes through here is tested, and we make sure it is something [ferrets] are interested in.”

If the ferrets aren't interested, it's back to the drawing board.

“We were experimenting with different flavors with our chicken treats and were going to add natural flavors to it,” Pietriacovo said. “We took over four different flavors [to the shelter that houses about 20 ferrets], three ate one, so that was out of the question.” After playing around with different flavors for a number of days, none of them were deemed a success and the formula stayed in its original form.

Homegrown ingredients made in the United States are standard for treat making.

#### What Owners Want

The bottom line is any treat given to a ferret must have the nutritional value its body needs. Make sure the treat is meat-based and doesn't contain sugar or other ingredients that ferrets have a difficult time processing.

“Treats should be evaluated on the same basis as other ferret foods — does this treat mimic the natural ferret diet?” Wysong said. “If the treat contains the aforementioned fun ingredients, the answer to this question is most certainly no.”

For those owners who still feel a need to indulge their own concept of what is considered treat-worthy, there is an alternative.

“We found that ferret owners like more of a fun flavor, so we have a raisin flavor and a peanut butter flavor, and we just came out with a banana flavor,” Janson said.

The treats are still meat-based and owners get to satisfy their definition of a treat. “It's just a raisin flavor, we don't actually put raisin in the product,” Janson said. The same goes for the peanut butter and banana flavors. “The treats are protein-based, which makes them a very healthy treat choice for pets.”

For people opting for an alternative to commercial treats, keep in mind that the most important step to consider is the natural diet.

“Because most are not able to feed their ferret a raw diet, treat time should be considered an opportunity to provide the ferret with a raw food that is truly genetically appropriate,” Wysong said. “Seek a treat that is raw, meat-based and replete with organs, bones, vitamins, minerals, probiotics and enzymes.”

While sugarless, healthy, meat-based products may not sound like a special indulgence to you, think again. According to Wysong, “Such an offering may not be considered a treat from your perspective, but will most certainly be welcomed by your ferret.”

Jennifer Mons McLaughlin lives in Minnesota and has been writing about the pet industry for more than 10 years.