

## All About GI Obstruction In Ferrets

**Here's what you need to know about gastrointestinal obstruction in ferrets.**

*By Jerry Murray, DVM*

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Ferrets are known for chewing and swallowing many objects that should not be ingested.

Gastrointestinal foreign bodies and hairballs (trichobezoars) causing a gastrointestinal obstruction are quite common in pet ferrets. In general younger ferrets are more prone to a foreign body causing an obstruction, and middle-aged to older ferrets are more prone to hairballs causing a blockage. Gastrointestinal blockages can be fatal if not treated quickly.

### 1. What is a gastrointestinal blockage?

A gastric blockage occurs when the stomach is full of a material that cannot pass out of it. This can be caused by a foreign body, such as a rubbery, spongy or plastic object.

Young ferrets chew on and swallow almost anything, but they seem to especially like soft rubbery and foamy objects. Those objects can include shoe soles and inserts, noses and eyes from stuffed animals, and pet toys. Less common items might include fleece from bedding, fabric from towels or sleep sacks, dog food pieces, dog treats, cherries with pits, carpet fibers and pieces of plastic.

In my experience, ferrets rarely eat socks, pantyhose, underwear or thongs — which dogs seem to favor — or string and other linear foreign bodies that cats seem to favor. Large hairballs that fill up the entire stomach are more common in middle-aged to older ferrets, especially those ferrets with adrenal gland disease.

An intestinal blockage occurs when a foreign body or hairball leaves the stomach but gets lodged in the intestinal tract. The diameter of the small intestine is very narrow, so some objects that fit into the stomach can get lodged in the small intestine. This can include soft rubbery objects, foamy objects and hard objects like cherry pits and bones. Hairballs that are small enough to leave the stomach may be too big to pass through the intestinal tract, so these may cause an obstruction in the intestinal tract.

### 2. How do I recognize a blockage?

The signs of a blockage vary depending on the cause of the blockage, where the blockage is located and how long it has been there.

Foreign bodies and hairballs in the stomach may cause vomiting, decreased appetite, lethargy, weight loss, pawing at the roof of the mouth, teeth grinding and tarry feces.

On the other hand, foreign bodies or hairballs in the intestinal tract usually cause more severe problems, such as teeth grinding, anorexia, vomiting, weakness, abdominal distension, shock and death.

### 3. How does my veterinarian diagnose an obstruction?

If you see your ferret eat an object that it should not eat, or if your ferret is having signs of a gastric or intestinal obstruction, then take your ferret to your ferret-knowledgeable veterinarian right away.

Your vet will start by doing a physical exam of your ferret. Some obstructions can be felt with gentle palpation of the abdomen. Unfortunately most obstructions in the stomach and some obstructions of the small intestines cannot be found while palpating the abdomen.

Radiographs (X-rays) are the next step. Bones and most metal objects show up very well on radiographs; however, foamy or rubbery objects and hairballs do not usually show up on a radiograph. A small amount of barium can be given to the ferret, and more radiographs can be taken. Not all objects will be visualized even with barium, but it may show where the obstruction is located.

A gas-filled distension in the stomach or in the first part of the small intestine may also help locate the obstruction. Ultrasound can also be used to help diagnose a gastric or intestinal obstruction.



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