

Do Ferrets Get Stressed?

Know the signs of stress in ferrets and how to alleviate it.

By Mary Van Dahm

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Ferrets Desiel, Weasel & Wolfey/© Courtesy Jennifer Griffin and Paula Baker

Every ferret reacts in its own way to different items or situations, so observe your ferrets to know what might stress them.

What a life! Ferrets lounge in a hammock, snooze in a sleep sack, munch on tasty kibble or play with a favorite toy. Who could ask for a more relaxing life? Is it even possible for a ferret to have stress in its life? Unfortunately, like the rest of us, ferrets aren't immune to the pressures of the world around them.

So what stresses a ferret? And how can we, as their caretakers, help them cope with stress? This article discusses some of these stressors and how to help alleviate stress in your ferret's life. Not all ferrets are affected by the same stressors, so watch your ferret's reactions to different situations to learn which stressors may affect it.

Three categories of stressors affect ferrets: environmental, social and physical/medical.

1. Environmental Stressors

Poor Living Conditions

No one likes to live in a crowded, dirty home — not even your ferret. Make sure that the cage you get for your pet is as spacious as possible. Your ferret not only needs room to sleep and eat, but also enough room to stretch and even play a bit. This does not mean you don't have to let your ferret out to play; your ferret needs that, too! But if you are away all day and you don't have a room that you can just let your ferret run around in while you are gone, then you must give your ferret as big of a cage as you possibly can. Ferrets that are constantly caged become depressed, and depression comes from emotional stress.

Keeping the cage clean is important, too. A clean cage harbors fewer odors and is healthier for your pet. Ferrets can develop urine burns and sores on their feet if they have to walk on filthy wires and can develop respiratory problems from breathing in bacteria-laden air.

Loud Or Sudden Noises

While some ferrets don't seem to mind noise in general, some sudden noises can startle them, and constant loud noises can hurt their ears. Noises such as vacuum cleaners, loud music, home remodeling, barking dogs, crying babies or screaming kids can stress your pet.

Don't put your ferret's cage in front of your stereo speakers or next to the TV. If the vacuum cleaner seems to bother your ferret, put your ferret in another room while you vacuum the room its cage is in. Keep small children and babies away from your ferret. Some ferrets get very stressed out by the sound of a baby crying. While most ferrets just express an interest in the sound, a few go into an attack mode. No one is really sure why this happens — whether the cries sound like a source of prey or if the pitch of the baby's cry hurts the ferret's ears. Based on what I know, I would never recommend that someone with a baby have ferrets in the same house unless extreme precautions are taken. This is not only for the safety of the child, but for the safety of the ferret. Some squeaky toys elicit the same response.

Unexpected Movements

If you grab your ferret unexpectedly, especially from above, it can alarm and stress your ferret. Deaf ferrets that don't hear you coming are the most affected. Imagine a hawk swooping down on you, and you will understand why ferrets are uneasy about this type of motion! If they don't see or hear you coming, it can frighten them very much.

Playing roughly with your pet can be stressful if your ferret doesn't understand your intentions. Your ferret may not know if you are truly trying to play with it or if you are trying to attack it. While ferrets are fairly hearty and can withstand a lot, they are definitely not as strong as a human and can sustain broken bones, sprains or internal injuries from roughhousing. Play gently with your pet, and it will play gently with you!

Noisy Or Unsafe Living Conditions

Is your ferret in an area of the house that is potentially dangerous to it? Are a lot of people walking or running through the room and almost stepping on your ferret? Keep your pet out of harm's way. A ferret that gets its toes or tail stepped on can become fearful if it happens frequently. The ferret also can be seriously injured or even die from an encounter with a foot. Give your ferret a safe place to play!

Lack Of Privacy

Ferrets need "down time." They need a place both in and out of their cages where they can go to be left alone. A sleep sack or tube of some kind, or a hanging sleep cube can provide your ferret with some privacy in its cage. Doctors at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology actually found that ferrets that they kept there were developing stomach ulcers until they started providing them with sleep tubes in their cages.

Hammocks can be OK for sleeping in, too, but these do not provide your ferret with any privacy. To correct this, cover the part of your ferret's cage that is near the hammock with a towel or small blanket to offer your ferret some privacy. A nest box attached to the cage also works well. Get one with a lid that lifts up to make it easier to clean and to make it easier for you to get to your ferret inside if needed.

Also be sure to tell any children in your household that if the ferret is sleeping or hiding, they must leave it alone until it wakes up on its own.

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