

## Explore The Ferret Skeletal System

**This "road map" of the ferret's skeletal system helps explain some ferret abilities and ailments.**

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Posted: September 1, 2009, 5 a.m. EDT

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The tip of the tail is the most common place for chordomas to develop on ferrets.

### Ferret Skeletal Ailments

Ferrets are prone to some problems with their skeletal system. Sadly, chordomas are common in ferrets. A chordoma is a malignant cancer that commonly occurs at the tip of the tail. Chordomas resemble a clublike enlargement at the tip of the tail. They can also occur in vertebrae in any region of the spinal column.

Chordomas on the tip of the tail are treated by amputating the tip of the tail. In most cases amputation of the tail solves the problem; however, I had one case in which the ferret developed a second chordoma in the cervical vertebrae of the neck about one year after a tail chordoma was removed. Chordomas that develop in the spinal column (instead of the tail) are very hard to treat and may become fatal or require euthanasia.

Osteomas and osteosarcomas are cancers of the skeletal system that are occasionally seen in ferrets.

Osteomas are a benign cancer, which are mostly seen on the flat bones of the skull, jaw and ribs. Surgical removal is the treatment of choice when possible, but if the entire tumor is not removed then it will likely regrow with time.

Osteosarcomas are a malignant cancer of the long (humerus of the arm and tibia of the leg) or flat bones. Osteosarcomas are common in large breed dogs like rottweilers, but fortunately are rare in ferrets. Treatment includes amputating the arm or leg and/or chemotherapy for this type of cancer. Osteosarcomas can spread to other locations, especially to the lungs. Click image to enlarge

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Jumping from a height can cause a ferret to dislocate its elbow and possibly require surgery.

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Injuries to a ferret's knee can also require surgery.

### Ferret Skeleton Injuries

Ferrets are also prone to some injuries to the skeletal system. Elbow injuries, knee injuries and fractures are common problems.

Younger ferrets commonly hurt themselves by jumping off of high places. When they land on their front arms they can dislocate their elbow or elbows.

An elbow dislocation is painful and usually causes lameness on the injured arm. A simple radiograph of the ferret's elbow will verify the dislocation of the joint. Sometimes the dislocated elbow can be fixed by "popping" the elbow back into place while the ferret is under general anesthesia and using a SAM splint to allow enough scar tissue to stabilize the elbow, but most of the time it takes surgery to repair the injured elbow.

Knee injuries occasionally occur when the ferret's foot gets stuck in a ramp while the ferret is going down it. The lower leg stops while the upper leg continues to go down hill, so the cranial cruciate ligament tears. This is very similar to the knee injury that athletes suffer while playing sports. This orthopedic problem usually requires surgery to repair, but some ferrets develop enough scar tissue with cage rest to stabilize the knee without surgery.

The bones of a ferret's paws, arms and legs are very thin and light; therefore, accidental trauma induced fractures are also seen in ferrets. Most of these fractures can be repaired with surgery or with a splint, but some of the worse cases may require amputation of the limb to solve the problem.

The ferret skeletal system has some unique adaptations that gives a ferret its long, slender body with short limbs. The long and flexible vertebral column reduces the risk of disk injuries; however, ferrets are prone to chordomas of the vertebrae.



The small bones of the limbs are also at risk for accident induced fractures.

Dr. Jerry Murray practices at the Animal Clinic of Farmers Branch in Dallas. He currently has two senior ferrets (Bam-Bam and Mr. Slate) and one hyperactive Rottie (Katarina).

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