

## Ferret Heart Disease

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A common problem in the older ferret is heart disease. Heart disease in ferrets is much like heart disease in dogs and cats. Doctors use many of the same methods to diagnose it and the same medications to treat it.

Ferrets that develop heart disease are usually more than 4 years old. Your ferret may have trouble breathing, it may pant after exercise, and it may be lethargic. It may develop a large abdomen, due in part to fluid accumulation or a large liver. Although not common, your ferret may also start to cough.

Your veterinarian will perform a physical examination and listen to your ferret's chest. The doctor will be listening for murmurs, irregular heart rates and changes in breathing sounds. If your ferret is very sick, it will be placed in an oxygen cage even before it is examined.

Your doctor may recommend a complete blood count and a serum biochemistry panel to check for other illnesses. The two tests that allow your doctor to diagnose and decide on the proper treatment for heart disease are radiographs and a heart ultrasound. Radiographs show a large heart, changes in the lungs and changes in the abdomen that are consistent with heart disease. With the heart ultrasound, your veterinarian can look for specific types of heart disease and determine how far it has progressed.

Based on the results of the ultrasound, your doctor will prescribe the right treatment for your ferret. Recommendations may be nothing more than a reduction in exercise and frequent examinations, or medication may be prescribed. There are a few general categories of medication that are prescribed for heart disease: diuretics, a medication called digoxin that makes the heart pump a little better and an ACE inhibitor that will take some of the pressure off the heart.

The prognosis for ferrets with heart disease depend on what type of disease is present and what stage it is in. Many ferrets go on to live a long life after a diagnosis of heart disease.

By paying close attention to your ferret's behavior and habits while the animal is in good health, you'll quickly notice any changes that may indicate one of these diseases. Working closely with your veterinarian, you can help ensure the continued good health of your pet.