

Ferrets Better With Age

An older ferret is a special friend, but it needs special care.

A ferret older than 4 years can be considered a senior citizen. Your pet may have mellowed to the point where it chooses to sit still in your lap for minutes or hours at a time. If in good health, the ferret may be normally active when playing but may be gradually shortening its playtime.

How can you decide whether your pet is aging normally or if it has a serious medical problem? Know your pet so well that if there is a change in its behavior, body weight or other characteristics, you will instantly recognize it. You also need access to a veterinarian who knows about ferrets.

Veterinary Care

Every ferret should have an annual veterinary check-up. The doctor will weigh the ferret, assess its coat and body conditions for the season of the year, check its eyes and teeth, listen to its heart and lungs, palpate its abdomen and, if the ferret is more than 4 years old, take a blood sample for a glucose test.

If your vet knows little about ferrets, encourage him or her to learn. All major ferret clubs can refer you to a ferret doctor. Most problems can be diagnosed and treated appropriately by an enthusiastic veterinarian and a devoted owner. Ferrets are good patients, cheerfully tolerating surgical and medical treatments that cause distress in other animals and people.

Vaccinations

Every ferret should have a distemper booster annually. If this is neglected for several years, your pet's immunity may drop to such a low level that it will be susceptible to this painful, fatal disease. If your pet has an alarming allergic reaction, remember that these reactions are not fatal if treated, and they are preventable. If your ferret has previously reacted to a vaccine, ask your vet to dispense a dose of pediatric antihistamine one or two hours before the vaccine. This can help prevent allergic reactions without interfering with the desired immune response to the vaccine.

Nutrition

Good nutrition, starting at weaning, gives any animal the best chance for a long and healthy life. A high-quality diet, made available at all times, is essential to keeping ill ferrets, particularly those with insulinomas, stable. If possible, offer an ill ferret high-protein snacks, such as strained baby meat, several times daily.

Dental Health

Ferrets usually do well on dry, crunchy foods than on moist diets. Feeding a soft diet causes plaque to build up on the teeth rapidly, causing periodontal disease. A ferret that suddenly starts dropping food out of its mouth, shaking its head while eating or chewing with its head in an unusual position probably has bad teeth.

If you see brown material on the upper molars, your pet needs its teeth cleaned. Delaying a cleaning for months can lead to serious gum disease and tooth loss. Bacteria traveling through the bloodstream from infected teeth can cause kidney infections and eventually kidney failure.

Dental work requires an anesthetic. Unless your ferret has a serious heart condition, this is safe.

A ferret that has lost some molars may have trouble eating enough to maintain its normal weight. You can adjust its diet by softening its regular pellets. Remember it will then need its remaining teeth cleaned more often.

Seasonal Changes

Ferrets naturally lose weight in the spring and gain it back in the fall as part of their response to extended or reduced hours of daylight. Seasonal changes can be dramatic. By the time your pet is 4 years old, you will know how much weight it usually loses and how its coat looks during the summer.

Very hot weather is stressful for a normal ferret and more so for a senior ferret with a chronic disease. Such a ferret should have a fan or air conditioner in its room. If a ferret suddenly loses weight when the housing area is comfortable and its diet has not changed, or if it develops any of the signs described below, see a veterinarian as soon as possible.

Living With an Aging Ferret

Older ferrets slow down gradually. A geriatric ferret may enjoy youthful company, but make sure that when your older ferret

is tire of playing, it can escape from the young one, which usually has far greater endurance.

Caring properly for an aging ferret takes time and financial commitment. Old or sick ferrets seem aware of their dependence on their owners and become more responsive, trusting and affectionate. This makes the decision to euthanize a terminally ill ferret very painful.

When your pet does not leave its bed unless you pick it up and has to be force fed, the time has come. A ferret this sick could die alone when you're away for only a short while. Surely there's a special place where the little loved ferrets will always be jumping for joy.