

First Aid For Ferrets

This guide alerts you to what first aid you can offer your ferret.

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Some plants can be toxic to ferrets if eaten, as can many chemicals or other substances. A ferret with suspected poisoning must always be taken to a veterinarian for assessment.

Electrocution In Ferrets

One of the most difficult emergencies to treat has hyperthermia, burns and shock as three of its myriad symptoms. Electrocution is a nightmare of the highest order for ferret owners; fortunately, it is an extremely uncommon event because wire-chewing is fairly uncommon for ferrets. If a ferret is electrocuted, the most important thing for owners to do is resist the temptation to touch the ferret. Instead, pull out the electrical cord from the socket. Realize that the ferret, or any fluids that may escape (like urine), may conduct the current, putting you at risk if you touch either.

Any ferret receiving an electrical shock requires immediate, urgent veterinary care — this is nothing that should be triaged at home. Affected animals, if still alive, will exhibit high temperatures due to the profound muscular contractions brought on by the electricity coursing through their bodies. The parts of the mouth coming in contact with the wire usually have severe burns. In addition, shock due to cardiovascular collapse and the effects of hypoxia will all contribute to a very difficult and often unrewarding clinical treatment.

Hypothermia In Ferrets

On the other hand, hypothermia, or dangerously low temperature, is rarely encountered at home. It is most often seen after surgery, as anesthesia also shuts down thermoregulatory mechanisms. Good ferret vets know this and prevent it by using heating pads, heat lamps and other methods to prop up a ferret's temperature during and after surgery. This is why most vets are loathe to release ferrets within a few hours after surgery.

Outside of surgery, the most common time a ferret becomes hypothermic is due to shock. Very ill ferrets should be kept in blankets to help support their body temperature, but never, never, never put a ferret directly on a heating pad, or cover it with layers of blankets. You will quickly compound your problems by making your pet hyperthermic, which may even result in burns — a much more dangerous situation.

Poisoning In Ferrets

Poisoning is occasionally seen in ferrets, but probably less than in other domestic species. Toxicity, just like heatstroke, is far easier to prevent than to treat in most situations. Keep household toxins out of ferret reach. Suspected poisonings are definitely emergency situations; and veterinarians are best equipped to treat these emergencies.

If poisoning is suspected, the first step is to determine what your ferret may have ingested. No way exists to test for all possible poisons, so the information and evidence you provide to your vet are key for definitive treatment.

In definite cases of poisoning, and in the absence of qualified veterinary assistance, the National Animal Poison Control Center (888-426-4435) is an essential call. This hotline is staffed 24 hours a day by veterinary toxicologists who can answer your (or your vet's) questions about poisons, whether the animal must be seen immediately, and possible modes of immediate action. The hotline charges for advice and consultation, but it is well worth the money.

Treatment for some toxins may begin immediately, and some must wait for arrival at the emergency clinic. Induction of vomiting is commonly used in non-caustic toxins, such as Tylenol or chocolate, and can be accomplished with a small amount of 3 percent hydrogen peroxide placed in the back of the ferret's throat with a dropper or syringe. This should only be attempted within two hours of ingestion in animals that are bright and alert. Inducing vomiting in animals that are not totally conscious may result in aspiration, and worsen a bad situation.

All suspected poisoning cases should be seen by qualified personnel, as the effects of a number of toxins do not appear until one or more days down the road. Antifreeze, a potent toxin, is one of these, and its effects do not begin to register until 24 hours after ingestion.

Vomiting And Diarrhea In Ferrets

Vomiting and diarrhea are common problems in ferrets. Vomiting in ferrets is loud and active, and it is something to take very seriously. They don't do it often. Many conditions, especially ulcers and insulinoma, cause nausea and drooling in ferrets, but a ferret that is actively vomiting should be seen by a vet that day.

Gastrointestinal blockage, most commonly the result of either an ingested toy or a hairball, is a common cause of true vomiting. It doesn't require any treatment before the trip to the vet, but it does require a prompt vet visit.

Diarrhea, on the other hand, rarely requires an emergency visit, especially if the animal is eating and drinking well. It is messy and annoying, but if the animal is active and eating, a vet visit usually can wait over a weekend until Monday.

One of the most common home treatments for diarrhea is the administration of electrolytes in the water or electrolyte solutions like Pedialyte. While this will rarely hurt a ferret, these solutions are useful only in overwhelming, acute, watery diarrhea, and then only in the first several days. Animals with chronic loose stools that are eating well (either their own food, or a replacement like Duck Soup, baby food or Carnivore Care) will rarely benefit from the added minerals and may even decrease their intake due to the taste. So don't overuse that Pedialyte!

While we are talking about conditions that require water or electrolyte replacement, let's talk about one of the great non-controversies of ferret ownership. Some vets consider the parenteral (or non-oral) administration of fluids by owners to be controversial. I don't agree. I think it has been great for sick ferrets everywhere. Many owners very capably administer subcutaneous fluids, where the fluid is placed under the skin for absorption by the ferret. It is a fairly easy procedure, and poses little risk to most patients. While not truly first aid, in the hands of a conscientious and observant owner, subcutaneous fluids may replace a trip to the emergency clinic, improve a chronically ill ferret's medical status, and allow a Friday night emergency to be seen on Monday morning. However, it isn't a cure for every ailment, and doesn't replace a late-night call to the vet for guidance.

Hypoglycemia In Ferrets

One of the most common urgent problems in ferrets, especially older ones, is hypoglycemia. Hypoglycemia, a direct result of the excessive insulin secreted by insulinomas in ferrets, manifests as neurologic disease due to the brain's high requirement for glucose. A drop in glucose results in seizures, small decreases result in "trances" during which time the ferret loses contact with its surroundings. Its eyes glaze over, and it begins to drool. More drastic drops in blood sugar — usually seen in animals with longstanding, obvious disease — may result in severe seizures, complete with falling over, twitching and sometimes vocalization.

Seizures are actually more distressing to the owner than to the patient. It is not a painful condition. As long as the animal is breathing, permanent organ damage is unlikely. However, you do want to restore blood glucose as quickly as possible in order to normalize neurologic function. Humans take glucose tablets and drink juice and sugary drinks; with ferrets, the most readily metabolized source of energy is Karo syrup (a form of high fructose corn syrup). This gooey syrup can be syringed into a ferret's mouth without fear of aspiration. Over a couple of minutes, this treatment reverses mild seizures and, even in the case of severe seizures, raises the blood glucose to a higher, nonlife-threatening level. Then you must take your ferret to the emergency clinic for an intravenous infusion of dextrose to return the glucose to normal levels. Remember, that if diagnostic blood glucose tests are done after Karo syrup administration, the level of glucose will be falsely elevated, possibly back into the normal range.

Your Failsafe

If you can't remember what to do in a particular situation, you can't go wrong by heading for the nearest clinic that is open. It is always better to make an unneeded trip than to wait beyond the window of opportunity on a potentially treatable problem. Hearing your vet say, "Well, this isn't a real emergency," is always a good thing, after all.

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