

First Aid For Ferrets

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

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Posted: December 22, 2008, 5 a.m. EST

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Reclining chairs pose a tremendous hazard to ferrets, because a ferret can be crushed by running under them or climbing into them and getting injured when someone uses the chair.

First aid for ferrets involves more than simply knowing how to stop bleeding or who to call, it also involves the important first steps of identifying what is actually an emergency. This article is not intended to turn you into "ferret EMTs," but simply to give you some very general guidelines on how to handle some common and not so common situations when your regular vet is unavailable.

Three Rules Of Emergency Care

Knowing the attention span of most of my students, friends, and children, I am a firm believer in the BLUF principle (Bottom Line Up Front). So, I am going to give you the most important rule of dealing with emergencies — and I think you may be surprised.

The No. 1 rule of handling emergencies is — (drum roll, please) — take a deep breath. That's it. How do emergency doctors look so cool under pressure, when every minute counts? Simple, they breathe. They take the time to assess the situation before leaping into action.

How can you do this when every minute or second counts for your ferret? Here is rule No. 2 — the number of veterinary emergencies in which seconds are critical is actually incredibly small. Most of what veterinarians see on an emergency basis is either: a) not an emergency, or b) something that will not be adversely affected by the few moments it takes to properly assess a situation and get your thoughts together. In real life, probably about half of the animals taken to emergency clinics are brought in either for chronic illnesses or other non-emergent problems.

The No. 3 rule of dealing with emergencies is something very familiar to doctors — *Primum non nocere* or "First do no harm." When an animal is in distress, everyone wants to do something, sometimes anything. However, the overwrought owner and even the well-intentioned vet can worsen a difficult situation by not taking that first deep breath before plunging in.

Facts About Ferret Emergency Care

Ferrets actually do not lend themselves to a lot of first-aid treatment. Their small size, as compared to other pet species, makes many types of first aid risky, especially if performed by inexperienced caregivers.

Let's start with that most identifiable of all emergency procedures, artificial resuscitation. A ferret that needs this treatment outside of the emergency room has only a slim to negligible chance of survival, even if CPR is administered by a vet. Why? The average heart rate of ferrets is 200 to 400 beats per minute, or at least 3 beats per second. No one can administer that rate of compression and, in most cases, broken ribs and punctured lungs often occur when the caregiver's adrenaline is pumping. The normal respiratory rate of the ferret is 33 breaths per minute, but the anatomy of the ferret — narrow nostrils, long windpipe and small lung volume — make getting air into their lungs (and in proper amounts) difficult.

If necessary, cardiopulmonary resuscitation is usually successful only in the veterinary clinic, where intubation, oxygen and administration of intravenous fluids and cardiac stimulants are available.

Trauma In Ferrets

For ferrets, traumatic injuries usually occur from the following: falls, being stepped on, and misadventures with other pets.

In my experience, traumatic injuries are more often suspected than confirmed. I also believe traumatic injuries are far more often misdiagnosed. One of the most common "emergency" complaints in ferrets is difficulty or inability to use the hind limbs. Hind limb weakness may arise from any number of reasons, including old age. It is extremely uncommon to see this as a result of an injury. Spinal injuries are rare because ferrets' spines rarely break and they don't develop disk disease with age. But if you and your hind limb-challenged pet catch a ferret-naïve vet on a Sunday morning

at the emergency clinic, you may quickly go down an expensive and unnecessary diagnostic path, with X-rays of the spine and a misdiagnosis of spinal disease.

But real traumatic injuries do occur that can be devastating. Two of the most common in ferrets are crushing injuries — one from being stepped on (always look down, and never step on a lump in a rug) another from being crushed by those miserable recliner chairs. (Ferrets and recliners, like ferrets and pet mice, are just a poor mix!) In these cases, the application of a lot of weight and pressure at specific points can break ferret bones, with legs and pelvises being common sites for traumatic fractures.

In most cases of ferret trauma, the best thing to do is to immediately immobilize the patient. Don't try to bandage or splint a leg. The pain the ferret would suffer if you handle an acutely broken bone will quickly get you bitten. Besides it being almost impossible to splint a ferret's leg, the weight of a poorly made or hastily applied splint or bandage can actually further separate the bone fragments and worsen the injury.

Instead, simply wrap the entire ferret in a towel or blanket to immobilize it and keep it warm. Cover the entire body and legs, but leave the head out. In cases of fractures, the most important thing is to keep the animal quiet. If wrapping your ferret doesn't work out, simply place it in a small pet carrier. The key is to immobilize the whole animal, and let the immobilization of the limb be handled by veterinary personnel.

Bleeding In Ferrets

Not everything gets smashed, sometimes it just gets torn. It's fairly common for ferret owners to find a small bit of blood in a common area, with no obvious source or cause. Ferret skin is very tough and difficult to puncture, which is a good thing if you have ever seen two newly introduced ferrets square off! In my experience, spot bleeding is rarely life-threatening. Toenails are a common source of bleeding. They often get torn on wire cages or trimmed too close. Only rarely does this warrant a vet visit, and most bleeding can be handled easily with a styptic pencil or, even better, styptic powder. There is a slight sting when applied, so be forewarned. If this material isn't available, drag a close-clipped nail across a wet bar of soap to stop the bleeding.

Other possible sources of bleeding include a broken tooth in the mouth (common), or blood in the urine or feces (pretty uncommon). These require a trip to the vet that day.

Topical treatments for traumatic or toxic injuries are generally safe for ferrets, including antibiotic creams, sterile saline for ocular foreign bodies and baths for contact with irritant chemicals. Note that these are all topical treatments — they are not ingested, injected or otherwise administered internally. Most of these treatments are safe for a few applications, but if you wish to use them on a long-term basis, discuss this with your vet.

Heatstroke In Ferrets

Extremes in body temperature are not uncommon in ferrets and can be urgent situations. Across the United States, hyperthermia (heatstroke) is a fairly common event in the summer, especially in houses without air conditioning. Ferrets do not tolerate extremes of heat well, and temperatures as little as 80 degrees Fahrenheit may pose problems for an active ferret. Ferrets do not sweat, and they have poor heat-dissipation mechanisms. One of the first and most obvious signs of hyperthermia is panting. Ferrets don't usually pant, even at high play. A ferret with heatstroke will become unsteady and rapidly become lethargic.

An oral thermometer is fine for taking a ferret's temperature, and a ferret with heat problems will not resist (another clue that there's a problem). The normal upper level of a ferret's temperature is 102.5 degrees — anything more than 104 degrees Fahrenheit is cause for concern. Immediately place the animal in room-temperature water — not cold water, or you risk making your overheated animal hypothermic. After a few minutes, wrap the ferret in a wet towel and head for the emergency clinic. Even ferrets that look like they are doing well will require fluids and often oxygen in order to combat the circulatory effects of heatstroke. Fluids restore the circulation, and organ damage must be assessed and treated. Preventing heatstroke is easier than treating it. When you feel hot, be aware that your ferret feels very hot.