

Older Ferrets

How to deal with ferrets that are 3 years old or older.

By Dr. Susan A. Brown

Ferrets 3 years old or older are faced with an increasing probability of disease. One year is too long to wait between veterinary examinations. Also, your vet may recommend more laboratory testing either annually or biannually, depending on your ferret's condition.

I recommend that all ferrets 3 years old or older coming in for routine examination not eat or drink for four to six hours before the examinations. This makes it possible to palpate the abdominal contents more easily, allows anesthesia to be used if necessary and allows the veterinarian to perform a fasting blood sugar at the time of the exam rather than at a later date. If your ferret is obviously feeling ill, please check with your vet prior to withholding food or water.

Examination

Your vet will continue to perform complete physical exams; however, due to the increased incidence of disease, I recommend a health checkup at least every six months. This will allow your vet to pick up such things as enlargement of lymph nodes, heart murmurs, skin tumors and abdominal masses.

Tartar starts to build up on the teeth of ferrets as they age, and it may be necessary to clean the teeth. Small amounts of tartar can be removed from the teeth of cooperative animals in the examination room. In cases where there is significant tartar buildup, or if the ferret is difficult to handle, it will be necessary to use anesthesia for the cleaning procedure, which may have to be scheduled for a later date.

Vaccinations and Heartworm Prevention

Annual canine distemper and rabies vaccinations will continue as before. Heartworm preventive should be continued if appropriate.

Diet

Your veterinarian may suggest diet changes based on your pet's health. For example, a common problem in older ferrets is kidney disease. In these cases, it is helpful to reduce the amount of protein in the diet to relieve the workload on the kidneys. With heart disease, it is recommended to reduce salt in the diet.

Laboratory Tests

Ferrets 3 years old or older should have a minimum of two tests run annually. These tests are a complete blood count (CBC) and a fasting blood sugar. In ferrets more than 5 years old, I recommend these two tests be performed every six months. A CBC can be used to detect the possibility of lymphoma and can detect anemia or underlying inflammatory disease. The fasting blood sugar is the best test to detect insulinoma (cancer of the insulin-producing cells of the pancreas). If your pet has not fasted prior to the exam, you will need to make another trip to the vet to have this test performed.

Another helpful diagnostic tool is an X-ray. Ferrets usually have to be anesthetized to get accurate X-rays because they have to lie very still. X-rays can show evidence of heart, lung and abdominal diseases. In some cases, the X-ray shows a problem that might be pinpointed more accurately with an ultrasound. This is where sound waves are bounced off of tissues and the organs are views on a video screen. Ultrasound is one of the most accurate means of diagnosing heart, lung and some abdominal masses. I recommend that a healthy-looking ferret be X-rayed at least annually after it reaches 5 years of age. Even if the initial X-rays are normal, your doctor will have something to compare them to if a problem occurs later.

Other tests may be recommended by your vet depending on what is found during the physical exam or after X-rays.