

How To Prevent Poisoning In Ferrets

Ferrets eat the strangest things, but owners can protect their pets from poisoning by being aware of possible dangers.

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Ferrets get into unexpected places where they might find something toxic to nibble on.

Accidental poisoning in ferrets is a common occurrence, possibly because ferrets are curious, active, flexible, agile, fast and fearless. These ferret traits and behaviors that owners find so endearing and entertaining also mean that keeping ferrets safe and preventing accidental poisonings is a big challenge.

Ferrets are natural explorers and can fit and slip through almost any opening and gain access to areas and things that are dangerous for them. They love to sample substances and objects with their mouths and consume almost anything they can chew or swallow, even if it tastes bad. The average home, garage and garden is full of things that are highly toxic to ferrets. The ferret's small size, inability to clear certain poisons from its body, and its inquisitive nature make a formula for potential disaster.

Ferret poisonings are difficult to treat and often end in death. Prevention is the best — and only — way to protect your pet against possible poisoning. By knowing what is poisonous for your ferret, you can do a complete inventory of your home and your pet's play areas and remove all toxic substances from your ferret's inquisitive reach.

Your Medications Are Dangerous To Your Ferret

A main cause of ferret poisoning is the ingestion of human medications. Common pain relievers, such as acetaminophen (Tylenol) and Ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin, Nuprin) top the list. Many drugs are cleared (detoxified) by the liver by special enzymes produced in the body. Research has shown that ferrets are very slow to clear phenolic compounds, such as acetaminophen, from the body.

The deadly effect of acetaminophen in ferrets is attributed to a combination of the type of enzymes involved, the ferret's prolonged metabolism with regard to clearing the drug from the body and the high dose of acetaminophen in a single capsule or tablet in relation to the animal's small size. In addition, studies have shown that although the drug is highly toxic to both males (hobs) and females (jills), females are the most sensitive.

Other drugs toxic to ferrets (designed for human use) include cold medications, anti-depressants and dietary supplements. It is likely that any medication prescribed for humans is dangerous for ferrets. So where would a ferret find human medication? Ferrets love to snoop inside of bags, pockets, purses, waste baskets, drawers, cabinets, and in and under furniture. If there is a route to climb that leads to nightstands and counters, ferrets find it. Any loose pills, tubes of ointment, vials, bottles or containers that have dropped onto the floor can quickly end up in a ferret's mouth.

The Danger To Ferrets From Other Pets' Medications

Many ferret poisoning cases are due to ferrets ingesting medicines intended for other animals. Several medications for dogs and other species are toxic for ferrets. Make sure your ferret does not have access to areas where you store medications for your other pets and always check with your veterinarian before giving your ferret any medication.

Deadly Pesticides And Ferrets

Insecticides/pesticides are a major cause of ferret poisoning. These include ant bait; ant, roach, wasp, fly, and spider sprays; snail bait, and other kinds of products designed to kill pests. Never spray chemicals anywhere near where your ferret plays, sleeps, eats or drinks. Many pesticide toxicities in ferrets are due to inappropriate use, or overdose, of flea and tick products, especially products that were developed for dogs. Always check with your veterinarian before treating your ferret with any product to kill parasites, as some of these products can kill ferrets as well.

Food Dangers For Ferrets

Foods for human consumption are an important cause of ferret poisoning. Caffeine can be toxic to ferrets, so be sure your pet cannot get into the trash and find coffee grounds or used teabags. Chocolate contains theobromine, a methylxanthine substance similar to caffeine that is also possibly toxic to ferrets. Xylitol, an artificial sweetener found in some brands of

chewing gum (such as Orbit) and candies, cause a drop in blood sugar that can lead to rapid death in some animals. Raisins and grapes are possibly poisonous to ferrets and might cause severe kidney damage. Onions and chives also possibly toxic and can damage blood cells. Macadamia nuts are poisonous for some animal species and, until proven otherwise, should be considered a potential danger for ferrets. When it comes to any kind of food, if you do not know for certain that it is safe for your ferret, then do not feed it!

House Plant Dangers For Ferrets

Most ornamental plants are toxic. The toxic parts of plants may include the leaves, flowers, bulbs, stems or all parts of the plants. [Click here](#) for a list of some of the more common poisonous house plants.

The bark of many trees is also toxic, so be sure that your ferret does not chew on or play with any sticks or twigs from your yard.

Chemical Products And Ferrets

Ferrets that escape from the house are at great risk of chemical poisoning in the garage, yard, and garden. Countless products highly poisonous to ferrets are found in garages, including paint, paint thinner, solvents, expanding glues, pool and spa chemicals, petroleum based products, alcohols, bleach, furniture polish, batteries and various cleaners. Cleaners containing phenols or phenolic compounds are especially poisonous for ferrets and should not be used to clean your ferret's housing and play areas, so be sure to check labels. Animals are attracted to the sweet taste of antifreeze and tasting just a few drops on the garage floor can cause irreversible kidney damage and death.

If your ferret escapes to the great outdoors, it is a high risk of accidental poisoning caused by toxic plants, fertilizers, snail bait, and rodent bait (poison intended for rats, mice, and gophers). Cocoa bean mulch fertilizer is especially dangerous because it smells like chocolate and animals are attracted to it and readily eat it. Unfortunately, it is also deadly.

Pennies are a leading cause of zinc toxicity, so check for loose coins hidden in the furniture, your pockets or on the floor before you let your pet out to play.

If you smoke, keep your cigarettes, cigarette butts, and ash tray where your ferret cannot find them. Nicotine is toxic for ferrets.

Your Checklist For Ferret Safety

Now that you know the key causes of ferret poisoning, check your home thoroughly, right away, to make sure you have removed all potential risks of poisoning!

1. Make sure your ferret is supervised at all times.
2. Make sure your ferret's play area is safe and secure.
3. Block all escape routes.
4. Close all doors to the garage and outside areas.
5. Check the floor and furniture for unsafe objects your ferret can swallow.
6. Fasten all cabinets securely.
7. Remove all plants, waste baskets, containers, and bags from your ferret's reach.
8. Hide your purse, backpack and brief case from your ferret. Do not let your pet nose around in them. In addition to pennies full of zinc, your ferret might find other dangerous substances such as prescription medications, cigarettes, matches, lighter fluid, chewing gum (with Xylitol sweetener), candy with artificial sweeteners, chocolate, ink, and potentially harmful perfumes and cosmetics.

If you think your ferret might have eaten something toxic, but are not sure, do not hesitate a moment to take your pet to your veterinarian. The sooner your ferret is diagnosed and treated, the greater its chances are for survival. It is much better to take your ferret in for an examination and find out it did not eat anything toxic, than to wait and find out, too late, that your ferret was indeed poisoned. Play it safe!

Sharon Vanderlip, DVM, has provided veterinary care to exotic and domestic mammals for 30 years. Dr. Vanderlip has owned, treated and loved ferrets, and is the author of more than 20 books on animal care and several scientific publications. She has received awards for her writing and dedication to animal health.