

Why Ferrets Get Red Behinds

Find out what causes uncomfortable and often treatable rectal or anal prolapse in ferrets.

By Rene C. Gandolfi, DVM, DABVP

Treatment Options

As you can see, many different conditions can lead to proctitis or rectal prolapse. Arriving at a proper diagnosis is the job of your veterinarian. Only by identifying the cause can proper and effective treatment be achieved. It usually isn't enough just to manage the area around the anus.

With the correct complete diagnosis, therapy is directed at all of the underlying factors. For bacterial infections, antibiotics are given. If the ferret is dehydrated from loss of water through diarrhea or vomiting, fluids can be given intravenously or by injection under the skin. IBD requires more aggressive actions designed to suppress the inflammation, in essence, to turn off the lymphocytes that are over-reacting.

For treatment of IBD, two drugs, prednisone or azathioprine (an anticancer agent) can be given as an oral medication. In addition dietary management is often tried. Since IBD may happen because the body "thinks" something in the current diet is the foreign material, a switch is made to a different food, often one designed to have the least antigens (stimulants of immunity). Alternatively, diets with a higher protein and greatly reduced carbohydrate content can be tried with the hope that better digestion of the food will leave less material in the intestines for troublesome bacteria to feed on. In some cases, just as is true for some of humans, increasing the amount of the fiber in the diet can sometimes lead to better bowel function.

Treatment of cancer is certainly possible. Many different protocols (mixtures of drugs) exist for the control of lymphoma. These protocols differ in the way the drugs are administered (orally or by injection), possible side effects, and, most importantly, the likelihood of successful remission of the cancer. Veterinarians speak in terms of remission (getting rid of all visible signs of cancer) rather than cure. At the moment, as long as the ferret feels good, it really doesn't matter if the cancer may come back later. If later turns out to be years in the future, the little guy just may out live the cancer.

Many times what is called a rectal prolapse is really just the tissue of the anus becoming inflamed and swollen, with no internal tissues protruding. This is best defined as proctitis. Symptomatic treatment of proctitis is aimed at decreasing the inflammation. Topical medication with an anti-hemorrhoid cream or ointment that contains hydrocortisone is often helpful. If tissue is actually protruding, as in a true rectal prolapse, the veterinarian may gently push the lining back inside and place a purse-string suture around the anus to prevent it from being pushed out again while the causes of the inflammation and straining are addressed. The suture is usually removed about two or three weeks later, once things have had a chance to quiet down.

Possible Treatments

- Topical anti-inflammatory creams
- Topical hydrocortisone
- Purse-string suture
- Antibiotics
- Dietary management
- Treatment of the underlying causes

Be Alert For Possible Problems

As an owner of a ferret, it is your responsibility to know all the day-to-day habits and activities of your little friend. Remain alert to the signs of intestinal inflammation that can lead to proctitis or rectal prolapse. If you notice changes in the character of the stool or any changes in your ferret's behavior that might indicate abnormal bowel function, consult with your ferret's veterinarian and get on top of the problem before things get out of hand. Proctitis and rectal prolapse are terribly uncomfortable for your ferret, but the more serious internal problems that cause them must be found and corrected.

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