

## Are You A Ferret Health Hero?

**Take this quiz to find out how much you know about ferret health issues.**

*By Alexandra Sargent-Colburn*

Posted: July 21, 2008, 5 a.m. EDT

For every question you answer correctly, you get 10 points.

**Ferret Health Question 1:** The correct answer is c). Ear mites are microscopic arachnids, not insects. Arachnids are spider relatives, and thus have eight legs to the insect's six. Ear mites in ferrets can't live long without a ferret host and are harmless to humans. A bad ear mite infestation in the ferret ear canal can cause a waxy discharge, however, and cause a ferret to scratch its itchy ears endlessly, possibly to the point of infection. Ear mite infestations are easily treatable with drugs by your veterinarian.

**Ferret Health Question 2:** The answer is d). Tail blackheads are simply a type of acne, they are not at all dangerous although they are certainly unattractive. A particularly bad case can actually cause a ferret to lose its tail fur altogether. Repeated warm water soaks and a wash with a gentle soap often clears them up. The use of medicated acne pads can help, too. Always contact your veterinarian to find out the best treatment for your ferret.

**Ferret Health Question 3:** The answer is c). Chocolate contains a compound called "theobromine," which is related to caffeine and means "food of the gods" in Greek. (Chocolate, food of the gods — sounds about right to me.) It is the theobromine in chocolate that gives us a little lift.

Unfortunately, the compound unquestionably causes fatalities to dogs in large quantities. I have never seen any research saying that theobromine is toxic to ferrets, but chocolate does have a great deal of sugar in it, and large amounts of sugar are definitely bad for ferrets — worse for ferrets than for you. Further, the sugar is also very bad for teeth, and ferrets don't brush after every meal.

**Ferret Health Question 4:** The answer is a). Rabies is a fatal disease of mammals caused by a virus, and ferrets should be vaccinated against it on a regular schedule. Ferrets are mustelids, they are also mammals. It doesn't matter whether a mammal is a wild or a domesticated mammal, all are capable of contracting rabies, as are you.

Some people object to vaccines for fear that the vaccine itself may cause a harmful reaction. Please know that if your ferret bites someone and you cannot prove that your ferret was vaccinated against rabies, it could put your ferret's life at risk.

**Ferret Health Question 5:** The answer is b), although I think I should get bonus points for a), a pale, orange-colored, cantaloupe-flavored soft drink.

Melatonin is a hormone treatment for adrenal disease, which is unfortunately very common to ferrets. Melatonin therapy is not a cure for adrenal disease, but it is very helpful, and becoming increasingly popular given the cost of surgical intervention. It is also a good alternative for a ferret in frail health that cannot undergo the rigors of surgery.

Melatonin is not a restricted hormone, many people buy it over the counter as a sleep aid. However, your veterinarian is the best person to help you decide if your ferret would benefit from melatonin therapy, and in what form it should be administered.

**Ferret Health Question 6:** The answer is false. Ibuprofen is a very common over-the-counter pain remedy —it is also extremely toxic to ferrets! Acetaminophen (as in Tylenol) is also bad for ferrets, as is aspirin. If you are concerned that your ferret is in pain, take it to the vet, and let the vet select a ferret-appropriate pain remedy. Don't ever try treating a ferret with medication from your medicine cabinet!

**Ferret Health Question 7:** The answer is true. Ferrets are obligate carnivores. This means that they are designed by nature to be meat-eaters. While they may crave carbohydrates, they do not digest them well. Things like dried fruits and vegetables can actually cause fatal blockages in a ferret's intestines that will demand surgical intervention or prove fatal! Unfortunately, ferrets don't know that, and they may enjoy the taste of these foods. Sugar is actually a carbohydrate and, as I mentioned earlier, sugar is not good for ferrets.

While some plants are relatively high in protein, ferrets, as obligate carnivores, are optimally suited to eat meat proteins. They are not in any way, shape or form suited to be vegetarians or vegans. For that matter, neither am I!

Ferret Health Question 8: The answer is false. Mast cell tumors are very rarely cancerous in ferrets, as they sometimes are for dogs. In ferrets, mast cell tumors are itchy nuisances that might cause your small friend to scratch and scratch and scratch to distraction! An itchy ferret is an unhappy ferret. Mast cell tumors are sometimes treated with an antihistamine to soothe the itch or can be removed permanently with surgery. Talk to your veterinarian about the best treatment for your ferret.

Ferret Health Question 9: The answer is false. Ferrets cannot and do not digest bits of rubber or plastic. (As I mentioned earlier, they have a hard enough time with dried fruits and vegetables!) In a best-case scenario should your ferret ingest these items, the rubber and plastic bits will go right through your little friend and wind up in the litter box or the nearest dark corner. Worst case? Your ferret faces surgery.

The intestine of a ferret is no bigger around than the diameter of an ordinary pencil, thus blockages are a real threat to a ferret drawn to the smell or chewable consistency of rubber and plastics. Consider this when you select ferret-appropriate toys for play. If your ferret stops pooping or strains to poop, consider the possibility of a blockage, and get in touch with your veterinarian, quickly.

Ferret Health Question 10: The answer is false. Ferrets can and do get the flu (influenza), just as humans do. However, they don't appear to catch the common cold. To keep it straight in your memory, remember the double F's. Ferrets get the Flu.

And yes. If your ferret seems to be coughing and wheezy — you know the answer by now — call your veterinarian. I must sound like a broken record by now with that suggestion, but it is the safest thing to do for your small friends. Remember, they can't tell you what's wrong. They have to rely on you to figure it out. Don't be ashamed, pass the buck. Call your veterinarian. And don't be intimidated by complicated sounding medical jargon. If you are reading this, you already have some Internet skills, and you can learn a lot on the Internet about ferret health. Still, a search engine is no substitute for a veterinarian. So pick up that phone!

**Scoring:**

0 to 25 points — You are just beginning to see how much there is to learn.

26 to 50 points — Ah, you've been studying.

51 to 75 points — Your ferrets are in good hands.

76 to 100 points — Your veterinarian is beginning to feel threatened.

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