

The Ferret Respiratory System

Unlock the mysteries of what the ferret respiratory system does and what can go wrong with it.

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The canine distemper virus is another virus that ferrets are very susceptible to. Signs of distemper start in the respiratory system, with fever, anorexia and a discharge from the nose. With time, skin rashes and neurological problems develop. Because distemper is almost always fatal in ferrets, vaccinate your ferret to protect against this fatal disease.

Aleutian disease is a parvovirus infection that can cause serious to fatal respiratory disease in very young ferrets (kits). In young kits, the parvovirus causes damage directly to the lungs, which can cause the kit to develop a fatal case of pneumonia. In adult ferrets, it can cause a chronic cough that does not respond to cough suppressants or antibiotics. Unfortunately, there is no vaccine for Aleutian disease.

The coronavirus is another viral disease that can cause serious to fatal respiratory disease in young ferrets. Most of the time, the coronavirus causes just a mild illness of the gastrointestinal tract; however, some ferrets develop a coronavirus infection that spreads through the blood to other organs. This systemic coronavirus infection can go to the lungs and cause pneumonia and death. Treatment can include drugs to suppress the immune response, antibiotics for secondary bacterial infections, fluid therapy and supportive care.

Ferrets can also have bacterial infections of the respiratory system. Bacteria can infect the nose (causing rhinitis), nasal cavity (causing sinusitis) and lungs (causing pneumonia), but most cases of bacterial infections of the respiratory system are secondary to a viral infection. Viral infections such as influenza and distemper can cause damage to the respiratory system and immune system, which allow bacteria to infect the respiratory system. Strep, E. coli, Klebsiella, Pseudomonas and Bordetella have all been reported in cases of bacterial pneumonia. Bacterial infections can be treated with antibiotics, fluid therapy and supportive care.

Fungal infections of the respiratory system are possible, but they are rare in pet ferrets that are kept indoors. Fungal infections may be more common in ferrets that are kept outdoors or are working ferrets that are exposed to the fungal spores in the soil.

Another cause of pneumonia is aspiration of food or liquids. Aspiration pneumonia is most commonly seen in sick ferrets that are being force-fed. Ferrets with megaesophagus are also prone to aspiration pneumonia. Treatment of aspiration pneumonia includes antibiotics, fluid therapy and supportive care.

Cancer can also invade the respiratory system. Lymphoma is the most common type of cancer in the respiratory system. By the time lymphoma spreads to the lungs, the ferret is usually in bad shape and may need to be euthanized.

One last problem in the ferret respiratory system is trauma. Ferrets are at risk for traumatic injuries from dog bite wounds, rocking chair injuries, falls and damage from falling objects. Trauma can cause injuries to the lungs and even death, so be careful when your ferret is out of its cage.

The ferret's respiratory system is very similar to the human respiratory system with the two main differences being the number of tracheal rings and the number of lobes in the right lung. Ferrets are also susceptible to a lot of viral and bacterial infections, with the human influenza virus being the most common problem. Fortunately most respiratory infections are treatable or preventable.

Dr. Jerry Murray practices at the Animal Clinic of Farmers Branch in Dallas. He currently has two senior ferrets (Bam-Bam and Mr. Slate) and one hyperactive Rottie (Katarina).