

The Complete Scoop On Ferret Poop

Look at your ferret's feces for some clues to its health.

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Some words of advice: It's good to pay attention to your ferret's poop, but don't obsess about it.

Like it or not, admit it or not, poop has fascinated us over the years. When poop is good, we hardly notice, but when it is bad, we pay attention.

About 10 years ago, I wrote a short article for the Internet called "The Poop Sheet" (now called "The Poop Chart"). I really stepped in it that day, and this particular subject seems to have followed me for years. People have reprinted the "Poop Chart" over and over, and I have even been asked to lecture on ferret poop.

Here is the full, unadulterated story of "the poop, and nothing but the poop."

Basic Rules Of "Poop-ology"

Each segment of the gastrointestinal tract of ferrets (and all other animals) has a specific role in processing food and making its components available for use by the body. The first rule of "poop-ology" is one of focus: the end goal of the digestive process is nutrition, not the production of poop.

Another very important concept, and one that I often have to remind ferret owners of, is "Don't be a stool-gazer." This means, don't ascribe too much importance to an individual poop. Most ferrets will poop three or four times a day. One bad one is not the end of the world, and one good one, in an animal with GI problems, doesn't necessarily mean that all is forgiven.

Why look at ferret poop, anyhow? Well, you are there cleaning the litter anyway, and it's always nicer to perform a medical chore than just a janitorial one. Although the condition of the poop is not a very specific indicator of overall health, it can be an early warning sign for many forms of gastrointestinal disease. Often the bowel movements of ferrets herald systemic disease far earlier than any other signs.

Three components — color, shape and consistency — are used to characterize ferret poop and might help determine where a problem in the G.I. tract might exist.

Normal ferret poop is a light tan to brown color; has a smooth, toothpastelike consistency and is tubular in shape. Exposure to air allows it to dessicate, thus causing it to shrink, turn dark brown and get hard.

It's important to note that a lot of diseases, especially non-GI diseases, allow ferrets to pass totally normal feces, so good poop doesn't equate totally with perfect health. Keep that in mind.

The Ride Begins

The Ferret Poop Chart

See the famous Ferret Poop Chart, with photos! [Click Here>>](#)The gastrointestinal tract is a long tube in most animal species, with distinct sections in which various stages of digestion take place. Each section performs a specific function, and failure of any part often affects the poop in different ways. Some areas are associated with subtle changes, some with more obvious ones.

The first stop is the oral cavity. In this area, both the teeth and the saliva cause profound and important changes to the food. Teeth, of course, are important for grabbing and crushing the food. The type of diet determines how the food is processed.

Due to the hard-packed nature of kibble, each piece must be broken into much smaller pieces so that digestive fluids such as saliva and gastric acids can begin the digestive process. Advanced periodontal disease may limit a ferret's ability to crush and swallow its food properly. The resulting change in the poop would be simple — there would be none, because the food is spit back into the food bowl after minimal processing.

Ferrets that eat whole animals generally tear off small pieces that are swallowed essentially whole — very little chewing is done, and most tissues are relatively available to the gastric fluids.

Saliva is another part of the early digestive process. Saliva not only acts as a lubricant and softener for food, but contains some digestive compounds — lipase, an enzyme that breaks down fat, and amylase, which begins the process of digestion by cleaving starches into small, more readily digested compounds.

The actual contribution of saliva to digestion is relatively small in ferrets and, similarly, the lack of saliva (which is exceedingly rare due to the small incidence of salivary gland disease in the species) probably has little visible impact at the "other end."

The esophagus is the long tube connecting the oral cavity to the stomach. It has no true digestive function. Esophageal disease can put a block on the passage of ingesta, either by regurgitation (seen in megaesophagus and DIM), or food refusal. Signs of problems here would be small to no poop, and significant weight loss in the ferret.

The Stomach

All Blocked Up?

Get the lowdown on GI blockage in ferrets. [Click Here>>](#)The stomach is the next major stop for food on our little tour, and the first where we can see significant poop changes in association with disease. The ferret has a simple stomach, which secretes acid and pepsin in response to the entrance of food. At this point, it really doesn't matter whether the food is kibble or prey, the stomach's actions (and the rest of the G.I. tract for that matter) are similar.

In the stomach, the food is attacked by gastric acid (a process called hydrolysis), which denatures proteins and releases them from their normally curled state. Simultaneously, the pepsin acts to break down the newly exposed bonds between the amino acids in the proteins, and chop up the proteins at the molecular level (a process called proteolysis).

With the exception of vitamin B-12, nothing is really absorbed from the stomach. The stomach is essentially a place where food is broken down and mixed. So how does this affect the feces?

Fecal changes are seen in several ways from gastric disease. When the stomach can't break down the ingesta due to inadequate acid production, larger particles with intact proteins pass into the small intestine. This problem is commonly seen in older animals with *Helicobacter mustelae* infection, a bacterium that attacks acid-producing cells.

Particulate size is important in the G.I. tract, as a large particle attracts and holds water, and may ultimately overwhelm the intestines' ability to resorb it. More water in the feces results in bulkier, looser feces. Animals with chronic stomach disease, such as *Helicobacter*, often have intermittent loose stools. Intact proteins are not ready for intestinal absorption and cause characteristic changes in stool character beginning in the small intestine.

Possibly the most characteristic fecal change occurs from gastrointestinal disease. Gastric ulcers are a common and possibly life-threatening condition in ferrets under stress — possibly from environmental changes or concurrent disease.

Any ulcer is a hole in the stomach lining. Ulcers tend to bleed, like any other wound, and if the amount of blood loss is severe enough, it is digested by the stomach acid and turns black (due to changes in the blood iron found in hemoglobin molecules.) If there is not a lot of bleeding, there may not be enough to discolor the stools. However, black stools signify profound hemorrhage and the distinct possibility of anemia and a life-threatening condition. Stools with this amount of blood are also usually loose, as blood is poorly digested and tends to drag water with it through the rest of the G.I. tract.

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