

Winter And Your Ferrets

Use these tips to guide you through cold-weather care for your ferrets.

By Sandra Mitchell, DVM, DABVP

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Set up a snow bin inside or put snow in your bathtub to allow your ferret to play in snow in a completely safe environment.

Winter months bring the thought of frolicking in snow, putting up Christmas trees and relaxing in front of a warm fireplace. Although this is a favorite time of year for many people, it can bring both joy and danger to your ferret friends. Understanding how to keep your ferret safe during the coldest time of the year makes the season joyful for all!

Safe Outdoor Fun For Ferrets

Many ferrets love to romp in fresh snow, which is good exercise as well as fantastic environmental enrichment. However, ferrets do not have the same common sense that people have when it comes to cold weather and are likely to stay out longer than they should. Ferrets are small and have a relatively large body surface area, which means they lose heat from their core relatively quickly. Fortunately, ferrets are much more cold tolerant than heat tolerant and they can withstand some time outdoors in the winter. You must decide when the ferrets should come back indoors.

Never leave your ferret outdoors unattended, even for a few moments, especially during the winter months. Out-of-doors playtime should be on leash and harness (a leash and a collar might be too easy for most ferrets to slip through) with you actively holding the leash. At "feels like" temperatures, which include humidity and wind chill factors, between 30 to 45 degrees Fahrenheit, ferrets can play safely for 10 to 15 minutes, depending on the animal. Small, petite ferrets will likely chill faster than larger animals. If at anytime your ferret starts to shiver or act cold, immediately end the play session.

Most ferrets become damp when tunneling and playing in snow. A wet ferret will get cold much more quickly than a dry one, so any animal that becomes wet should be brought immediately back into the house to get dry and warm up. A safer alternative to outdoor play is bringing a large tub of snow into the house, or filling a bathtub with snow. This way, ferrets can jump out of the snow and warm up in the house if they feel chilly, which allows them to self-regulate their temperature.

Ferrets can suffer frostbite when exposed to cold for too long. Initial signs of frostbite include redness of the extremities (paws, nose, tail, ears), followed by whitened skin and discomfort, followed by numbness. An animal suspected of having frostbite should be slowly and carefully warmed, and must be seen by a veterinarian immediately.

Poisons And Toxins To Beware Of In Winter

Winter weather fun brings with it some concerns for poisoning in the ever-curious ferret. Avoid any areas treated with snow and ice melt. These chemicals can be irritating to a ferret's skin, as well as toxic if ingested. "Paw safe" winter salt is available, but even this formula can be irritating if ingested. Another concern is potential exposure to antifreeze, which is commonly used during winter to keep motor vehicles and winter "toys" running, as well as winterizing homes and camps. Antifreeze has a sweet taste to it, and only a few licks can prove fatal to ferrets. Special pet-safe antifreeze is available, but exercise caution even when this chemical is used.

Poisoning can occur indoors, as well. Christmas tree water contains tannins and other chemicals that can be irritating and even fatal if swallowed. Liquid potpourri is popular for its seasonal scents, but ingestion of this caustic liquid has killed many animals.

Ferret Indoor Safety Tips For Winter

Our houses change dramatically during the winter months as we decorate for the holidays and prepare for company. As careful as we are to ferret-proof during the year, we must exercise the same caution during the winter months. First and foremost, carefully secure all doors. When people visit, it is easy for a door to be left open that would normally be kept closed, especially indoors, and this gives ferrets access to forbidden territories, which are terribly inviting to curious ferrets. Use Plexiglas inserted into tracks in doorframes to create a barrier that allows guests to enter and exit without risk of a ferret friend following.

Always ferret-proof any decorations you use. Christmas trees are fantastic climbing grounds, and ornaments and

other decorations might be tempting (but dangerous) for a ferret to stash. Additionally, some ferrets may be tempted to chew on the extra electrical cords involved with Christmas trees and decorations.

Fireplaces need to have sturdy covers in place at all times when ferrets are loose, and preferably should be shut off to avoid the risk of thermal burns. Candles and other open flames provide similar dangers. Don't forget to ferret-proof heating registers and unplug portable heating devices. Curious ferrets can easily be singed by getting too close to these.

Another indoor risk is overheating. Ferrets are much more sensitive to heat than they are to cold; and the warm, dry air of an excessively heated home could potentially be a risk to pet ferrets.

The Flu Fight And Ferrets

A disease that can be passed from a human to an animal or vice versa is called a zoonotic disease. Many conditions fall into this category, but, fortunately, not many involve ferrets. Perhaps the most common zoonotic disease that does involve ferrets is influenza.

Ferrets cannot catch the common cold, but they are very susceptible to the flu. Unfortunately, many of us are unable to determine whether we have the flu or a cold. Whenever you experience upper respiratory symptoms, assume that you might have the flu and take precautions to protect your ferrets. Wear a surgical face mask and wash your hands well before handling your ferrets, which helps prevent transmission of the illness to your pet. The wisest choice is to avoid contact altogether, if possible.

Infected ferrets can also transmit the disease back to humans; if your ferret exhibits signs of the flu, do not allow people to handle your sick pet.

Fortunately, influenza is largely self-limiting. Most healthy adult ferrets feel miserable for a few days, suffering from a runny nose and eyes, sneezing, coughing, a fever and, occasionally, diarrhea. Most ferrets recover uneventfully. Very young and very old ferrets, as well as those with a concurrent illness (such as insulinoma or adrenal disease) can be much more severely affected.

Treatment for the flu generally involves nothing more than general supportive care, such as drinking fluids, getting hand-feedings and enjoying a warm steam "bath." Veterinarians sometimes prescribe antiviral medications. The flu is caused by a virus, so antibiotics are not effective for either sick ferrets or sick owners. Any ferret showing signs of illness should be examined by a veterinarian.

With a little planning and the proper precautionary measures, winter time can be a fun and exciting season for both you and your ferret. Make sure your fuzzies stay safe and healthy this winter as you enjoy and explore the best the season has to offer!

Dr. Mitchell owns Animal Medical Associates in Saco, Maine. She shares her home with 14 ferrets, 11 cats, two birds, a dog and a good-natured husband.