

## Time

Ferrets require at least 4-5 hours a day outside of their cage to run around. They are more like a kitten than a gerbil or hamster. Although they are small animals, they are very energetic and playful, and need at least 30 minutes to an hour of your time each day. A young ferret under a year old will be up and ready to play about 2-3 hours at a time. An older ferret will still be just as playful, but for only 1-2 hours at a time. Ferrets are just like people in the fact that the more stimulation they receive, the more energetic and intelligent they will be. Ferrets will also readily adapt to your schedule. If you let them out at certain times every day, they will be at the cage door right on time ready to come out and play.

## Cages

You should have a decent sized cage in which to put the ferret when you will not be home or sleeping. Some people prefer to let their ferrets run around 24 hours a day, but it also depends on how many ferrets you have. In the case of an emergency, it is a lot easier to track down several ferrets if they are locked in a cage, rather than scattered around your house. It is also less likely that a ferret will get out of the house without you knowing if you are locking them up and doing a head count periodically. Cages need to be at least two or three feet in length and height, and have at least two levels. A ferret that is kept in a small cage for an extended period of time will tend to have his muscles atrophy, and not be very energetic. Cages can be store bought or home made, and both have their pros and cons. Home made cages can be cheaper, but take a long time to make, and can be harder to clean. Wood is not a good idea to use in building a cage, as it can absorb urine and other fluids. Plexiglass or glass should never be used, as it makes the ferret feel isolated, and makes for poor circulation. Wire is ideal in that it is easier to clean, but it can be very difficult to fashion together. Store bought cages can be more expensive, but easier time wise. Again, plexiglass, glass, or aquarium cages should never be used. Wire cages are the most common, but the wire floor is very hard on the ferret's feet. The answer to this is to cover all wire flooring with either sheets of vinyl cut to fit, carpet remnants, or ferret bedding (old towels, T-shirts, blankets, etc.)

## Money

Ferrets require a substantial amount of money to acquire and keep healthy. An average pet store ferret is about \$100 to \$150, and an average shelter ferret is about \$25 to \$75. A decent sized ferret cage bought new will run anywhere from \$75 to \$300. Anything less than \$75, unless you build it yourself, is probably not big enough for the ferret. Ferrets require yearly vaccinations from \$30 to \$100 depending on your vet. In order for a ferret to thrive, they require more expensive food from \$5 to \$20 per 5lbs. Ferrets can exist on cheaper food, but we could exist on just candy bars too. They will not be at their best on it, energywise, or healthwise. Various health problems as they grow older can run into the hundreds of dollars for surgeries, and/or medicines.

## Ferretproofing

You will need to completely ferretproof your home. Ferrets are very inquisitive animals, and due to their small size, can get into dangerous places that you never thought they could get into.

You also need to develop a mind set about protecting the ferrets from harm. Although they act pretty tough, because of their small size, they are rather fragile. To ferretproof, you need to crawl around your house on your hands and knees, and look for any small hole bigger than 1x1 inches, and plug it or block it off. This includes ventilation ducts that might be able to be pulled off, cupboards that have holes inside, appliances such as refrigerators, stoves, dishwashers, and washing machines. Never ever assume that a ferret will not get into a certain room or area. There is no such thing as 100% ferretproofing, and the ferrets themselves will show you exactly what you might have missed. Furniture needs to be carefully checked over. Recliners and sofa beds can be death traps for ferrets. They will crawl under and get up in the gears, and when someone sits down or operates the gears, the ferret can come to an unpleasant end. Swivel chairs may roll over a ferret's foot or tail. Even though you may think you know where the ferret is, never assume. Many ferrets have died that way. Regular couches also need to be ferretproofed. Ferrets can get inside the couch and crawl up in the springs, and come to an unfortunate end. Look around your house to see if you have anything like this. Ferrets like to chew on leather, plastic, and rubber. This can be a very bad thing if the object is small, and the ferret swallows it. Blockages are life threatening to a ferret. You will need to make sure that things such as rubber erasers, any kind of Styrofoam, sponges, shoe insoles, foam earplugs, rubber door stoppers, and anything else spongy or springy is kept out of their reach. Ferrets can also get their heads stuck in toilet paper rolls, so it is a good idea to tear them up before you throw the empty ones away. One in a great while a few ferrets will even chew on electrical cords which is very bad. A little coating of bitter apple or Tabasco sauce will usually cure this, however. Ferrets are also excellent climbers. The can find complicated routes to places you never thought they could go. You may need to rearrange things slightly to keep them from knocking things over. One way to keep ferrets out of rooms you don't want them in is a baby gate that has plastic floor vinyl stapled to one side. A large piece of wood, or plexiglass cut to fit and anchored in will also work.

## Litterbox Training

Ferrets can be trained to use the litterbox. However, depending on the ferret, and how much time you are willing to spend on litter training, your ferret could have anywhere from a 100% hit rate, to a 0% hit rate. Most ferrets average about 75% hit rates. This means you may occasionally get a little 'present' in the corner of the room. Some ferrets even go out of their way to move the litterbox and go behind it. You must be prepared to spend several hours to several months litter training, and the more attention you can give to the training, the more likely you will have a litterbox trained ferret. When litter training, the best way is to start the ferret out running around in a small room, such as a bathroom, and work your way out from there. Ferrets will generally go within a few minutes of waking up, or after eating. When you first wake the ferret up, place him in the litterbox. Do not let him out until he has gone. At this

point, immediately give him a treat. If you catch your ferret going somewhere he shouldn't be, immediately place him in the litterbox. Try to get him to associate going in the litterbox with receiving a treat. This can take a lot of time and patience, and it depends on how tolerant you are of 'accidents' as to whether a ferret will work for you. Never physically punish a ferret for any reason. They will only learn to fear you, and will not associate something they did 5 minutes earlier with why they are being hurt.

## Smell

Ferrets, like any other animal, have a slight odor to them. Ferrets specifically have a musky odor to them. As long as the ferret is spayed or neutered, the smell should not be overwhelming. Descending makes no difference in a ferret's overall smell. Bathing will get rid of the smell temporarily, but the smell will get stronger than normal shortly afterwards, as the oils in the skin try to compensate for the drying effect of the soap. A ferret will groom themselves and each other, so bathing is usually unnecessary. If the ferret's bedding is changed at least weekly, and the litterbox kept relatively clean, the ferret should have only the very slight musky smell, no different from a dog or cat. A ferret that has not been spayed or neutered will have a very very strong smell, especially when they go into heat. This is just yet another good reason to make sure your ferret is spayed or neutered. In regards to descending, a ferret can poof much like a skunk.

However, their smell is not as bad as a skunk, and it dissipates quickly. Descending removes these scent glands, so the ferret can no longer poof. His poofing ability can protect him though, as he will poof when very frightened, and the scent may help him to find his way home should he get outside.

## Nipping

A ferret which has been well treated and bred to be a pet should not bite or be vicious, but ferret play does include mock combat, and kits won't know how hard they can put their teeth on you without hurting you. Just remember, ferrets are not malicious, they just need to learn what behavior is acceptable. Most baby ferrets can be successfully nip trained within a few weeks, older ferrets may take a little longer if they have never been nip trained. Rarely, you may come across a ferret that has been abused, or is from a bad breeder, that will bite severely. Unless you have extensive experience with biting ferrets, it is best to leave these ferrets to ferret shelters, or experienced ferret owners. In all cases, positive reinforcement works much better than punishment. Nose flicking is instinctive, but the ferret will learn to associate your hand with pain, and you want to avoid that. In the case of a very young ferret (not full grown), the easiest way is when they bite on your hand or finger, shove your finger back further in their mouth, so they can't close their mouth, or get any kind of pressure. The other way is when they grab your finger, with your finger still in their mouth, grasp under the jaw and squeeze slightly. This is very unpleasant for them, and they will quickly learn not to grab you. Just be careful not to hurt the ferret when you are doing this. In the case of an older ferret, try using a signal he already understands, such as a high-pitched yelp, followed by a loud NO! Giving him time out

in a small cage, such as a carrier (not his sleeping cage) and ignoring him for a few minutes will also help. You can also scruff him and yell NO! very loudly in his face. Covering your body part in bitter apple or bitter lime may discourage him, since it tastes awful to most ferrets, or the opposite, cover your body part in linatone and he will probably just lick you to death.

The most important thing to remember is that you want the ferret to learn to trust you, not to be afraid of you. Lots of loving will also help.

## ***Age and gender***

Ferrets are playful at any age. Kits under a year are usually like hyperactive kittens. They want to play nonstop for 4-6 hours at a time, and only sleep when there is nothing else to do. Adult ferrets are just as playful, just not for as long. They will go strong for 1-3 hours before they are ready for a nap. A ferret's playfulness never changes, just the amount of time they are ready to play. A ferret who is nearing old age will still want to play, though maybe only a half hour to an hour at a time. There is no major personality difference between males and females, or between different colors. Males are generally larger, between 2-4lbs compared to 1-3lbs for females. Each ferret has their own distinctive personality, regardless of gender.

## ***Maintenance***

Ferrets are considered high maintenance pets in regards to other animals such as cats, dogs, hamsters, and such. To begin with, female ferrets must be spayed, or else bred every year, which is not recommended. Otherwise the hormones in their body will build up, and they will develop aplastic anemia, which is fatal. Male ferrets that have not been neutered are very aggressive towards other ferrets when in heat, to the point of killing other ferrets. Breeding is very difficult, and NOT recommended. Ferret kits must have two distemper shots 3 weeks apart, followed by a booster shot once a year. Canine distemper is 100% fatal to ferrets, and extremely contagious. There is no cure. Keeping your ferrets indoors is no safeguard against contracting distemper. Most states still kill and test ferrets for rabies in a bite case, so having your ferrets vaccinated usually protects them. Never in the history of the United States has a ferret ever passed rabies onto a human.

Ferrets need to have their nails clipped at least once every other week. This is relatively easy, simply put some linatone on their stomachs to keep them busy, and clip away with regular nail clippers. Just be careful not to cut the red line, as this is the blood vessel, and will cause the ferret to bleed as well as being very painful. Ferrets should also be checked for earmites at the vet, and have their ears cleaned once a month. A ferret earwash and a q-tip or your finger work pretty well. A ferret's cage should be completely cleaned at least once a week, and their litter boxes cleaned at least twice a week. The type of litter is very important, never use a clumping litter or a very dusty litter. The best available litter is compressed wood pellets, found in both pet stores and farm supply stores. You may have to go a little out of your way to find a better litter, but in the long run, both smell wise and health wise, it will pay off.

Do not use wood chips/shavings. Ferrets should be kept indoors, they cannot tolerate temperatures much above 85 degrees, and can and will die of heatstroke if exposed to higher temperatures for an extended period of time. A ferret life span

is 6-9 years, so you must be prepared to take care of them day after day, year after year, for their lifetime. Ferrets grow very attached to their owners, and have actually developed bleeding ulcers, and died when separated from a home they have known all of their lives.

## ***Food***

Ferrets are carnivores, and cannot digest fiber. Therefore, they need a high protein, high fat, low fiber, meat based diet. The food needs to have 30-35% protein (32-38% for young ferrets under the age of four), and 15-20% fat (18-22% for young ferrets). The first ingredient should be animal protein, preferable chicken or poultry, not fish, and as at least 2 or 3 of the next few ingredients. Corn should not be in the first 3 ingredients. Check foods labeled as ferret food carefully, they often do not meet ferret food requirements. This is not always the case, but it is best to read the ingredients for yourself. Some brands of kitten food also meet the requirements. Dog food is not acceptable, as it lacks nutrients ferrets need.

## ***Compatibility***

Ferrets generally get along well with cats and dogs, although you will need to supervise encounters for the first several months or so. When introducing a new ferret to an established ferret in your home, you may have a dominance battle lasting anywhere from a few minutes to a few months depending on how territorial the original ferret is. The longer you have had a ferret in your home, the more territorial he will be to any new ferrets, which can result in a dominance battle lasting anywhere from a few minutes to a few months. If possible, introduce new ferrets at a place other than your home. Young children should always be supervised when around ferrets. Ferrets are not malicious, but they will defend themselves when hurt. You should never leave a young child around a ferret unsupervised.

Ferrets are very intelligent, very playful, very sociable animals. When treated right, they can be extremely loyal and affectionate. Ferrets will constantly amuse you by their antics and curiosity. They are like a permanent kitten in playfulness, and a two year old child in messes. When they look up at you with their big eyes, it is almost impossible to be mad at them. They do take a lot of work, but they are more than worth it. There is also a wealth of ferret information on the Internet at <http://www.ferretcentral.org>. This brochure was created by Shelley Knudsen. If you have any other questions, please contact:

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# ***Adopting a ferret***



## **Is it the right pet for you?**

**Are you thinking about adopting a ferret into your home? Do you know very much about these curious little creatures? Before you take the plunge, and add a ferret member to your household, you may want to read the following information.**

**When getting ready to purchase a ferret, it is usually a good idea to buy a few books on ferret ownership. The Internet ferret faq also has a wealth of information. Do you know anyone that owns a ferret? Talk to them and see what ferret ownership is like. Call or visit your local ferret shelter and talk to them about what it is like to have ferrets. The more information you can gather, the more well prepared you can be to actually bring a ferret into your home.**