

## ARE FERRETS LIKE RATS?

Ferrets, or *Mustela putorius furo*, are domestic animals, and are in the same family as weasels, otters, and mink. They are NOT rodents in any way, shape or form. Personality wise, ferrets are actually kind of in between cats and dogs, a little closer to dogs. They are very friendly, and make excellent pets. Some are cuddly, others more independent. Just like other pets, each ferret has its own distinct personality.

## DON'T FERRETS SMELL?

Like any other animal, ferrets have a scent to them. However, a well taken care of ferret, who has been spayed or neutered, and who has their bedding changed frequently, should have only a very minor scent. Bathing a ferret will get rid of the scent completely, but to compensate for the dry skin from bathing, a ferret will secrete oils that will actually make them smell stronger after a week or so. Ferrets will groom themselves, just like a cat, and will actually smell less if you never bathe them as long as you keep their litter box clean and change their bedding at least once a week. A ferret that has not been spayed or neutered will have a very strong smell, but getting them spayed or neutered will eliminate this. Descending makes no actual difference in a ferrets overall smell. A ferret has scent sacs, similar to a skunks. If a ferret has not been descended, and becomes very excited or afraid, they can release a short burst of scent. However, this scent dissipates very quickly, and in fact can be helpful in letting the owner know that something is wrong. Complete descending is also a very difficult process, and some ferrets will end up with medical problems late in life as a result of an improper descending.

## DO FERRETS BITE?

A ferret that has been well treated and well bred should not bite or be vicious, but ferret play does involve mock combat, and a ferret will not know how hard they can play with you without hurting you. Ferrets have very thick skin, so when they play with each other, and drag each other around, they don't hurt each other. However, when they try to play with you this way, their play can be painful. Ferrets simply need to learn that you have more tender skin, and that they cannot nip you like they would another ferret. Punishing a ferret will achieve nothing but making the ferret afraid of you, and more likely to bite. Instead firm pressure on the lower jaw, or

cheeks, or putting them in a time out, will achieve much more. A kit is a little easier to nip train, due to lack of jaw strength, but ferrets of any age can be trained by an experienced ferret owner.

## AREN'T FERRETS WILD ANIMALS?

No. There are two different kinds of animals that go by the name ferret. There are black-footed ferrets and domestic ferrets. They are distant cousins, in the same genus, but different subgenus and species.

The black-footed ferret may look similar to the domestic ferret, but they do not resemble the domestic ferret in much more than that. The black-footed ferret is an endangered species, and while they may look cute and playful from a distance, would just a soon take off a chunk of your finger. They are wild animals, and do not do well in captivity. Their main diet is the white tailed prairie dog, and desert like climates. The domestic ferret is what you see in pet stores. These are sweet playful creatures that can bond strongly to humans and other creatures. They can not survive out in the wild, they are too far domesticated. They can not forage for themselves for food, water, and shelter. Domestic ferrets are not feral anywhere in the world except in New Zealand, and this was only because they released hundred of thousands of domestic ferrets there in hope of creating a feral colony. A few thousand managed to survive simply because of the sheer numbers released.

## ARE FERRETS GOOD AROUND KIDS?

Maybe. It depends on the maturity of the child, and the temperament of the ferret. Ferrets are small, fragile creatures, and have only their teeth and nails to defend themselves with, unlike a dog or cat who can usually bark or get away. Hyperactive young children and hyperactive ferrets usually do not mix well. However a more mature child and a calmer ferret may get along splendidly. Ferrets also require more maintenance than cats and dogs, and most children are just not responsible enough to take care of a ferret by themselves, without neglecting the ferret.

## CAN YOU KEEP A FERRET AS A PET?

Yes. Domestic ferrets are designed to be pets. Ferrets do fine in a cage part of the time, as long as they are allowed to get out and run around for at least a few hours a day. Ferrets eat high quality kitten food or ferret food, and can drink out of either a water

bottle or bowl. They can bond strongly to you, and can be both independent and affectionate.

## WHAT DO YOU FEED A FERRET?

Ferrets are carnivores by nature, so they need a meat based diet. Most high quality kitten food and ferret foods meet the requirements, but it is best to check the ingredients for yourself. Grocery store foods are NOT acceptable. Ferret food requirements are: 30-35% protein (32-38% for young ferrets under the age of 4), 15-20% fat (18-22% for young ferrets), and less than 3% fiber. The first ingredient should be animal protein (meat), and as at least 2 or 3 or the next few ingredients. Ferrets can not digest fiber, so limit fiber rich foods and treats. Some people will say, hey ferrets can live off of anything. We as people could live off of just candy bars, but would we be at our full energy and health? Probably not. A good diet is very important to both people and animals.

## CAN YOU LITTER TRAIN A FERRET?

Usually. However, depending on the ferret and how much time you are willing to spend litter training a ferret, you can end up with anywhere from a 0% to a 100% hit rate. Most ferrets average about a 75% hit rate, so you have to be prepared for the occasional 'present' in the corner of the room. Ferrets are best trained by rewards, never by punishment.

## WHAT IS 'FERRETPROOFING'?

Ferrets are by nature very curious animals. They like to get into small spaces and rooms and investigate. The problems are when these areas are dangerous to the ferrets. Appliances such as refrigerators, stoves, washing machines, and similar items can be dangerous if the ferret manages to get inside. Couches and recliners can be death traps for ferrets. A ferret can get crushed in the gears of a recliner or in the springs of a couch by an unsuspecting owner who thinks the ferret is not even in the room. Ferrets love to chew on sponges, erasers, shoes, foam earplugs, silly putty, foam rubber, styrofoam, insulation, rubber door stoppers and anything else spongy or springy. These can all cause life threatening blockages in a ferret. Toilet paper rolls and paper towel rolls can be a problem as the ferret can get their head stuck inside and either choke or suffocate.

## **DO FERRETS NEED TO HAVE SHOTS?**

Yes. Ferrets need to be vaccinated for both canine distemper and rabies every year. Canine distemper is 100% fatal to ferrets. There is no cure once they catch it, only prevention. It is also extremely contagious. Just because a ferret does not go out of the house does not mean they can't catch it. Young kits and ferrets with unknown vaccination histories need to have at least two shots, possibly three, each shot 2-4 weeks apart. Ferrets can catch rabies, but the chance of them infecting another is slim to none. Regardless, having your ferret vaccinated for rabies is a good idea to protect them in the case that they ever bite a stranger. If they have been vaccinated, they will probably simply be quarantined. If they have not been vaccinated, there is always a chance they will be killed for testing.

## **DO FERRETS NEED TO BE SPAYED OR NEUTERED?**

Yes. Both male and female ferrets have a very strong odor while in heat. Male ferrets will become very aggressive to other ferrets, to the point of injuring or even killing other ferrets. Female ferrets, if not bred every year, will develop aplastic anemia, and will die. Breeding is very difficult and not recommended. First time mothers will not always take care of their kits, and another nursing mother needs to be willing to take care of the kits. Most ferrets purchased in pet stores are already spayed or neutered, but it is best to check with your vet to be sure.

## **AREN'T FERRETS NOCTURNAL?**

No. Ferrets sleep about 16 hrs a day, but they will readily adapt to your schedule. If you let them out at certain times every day, they will be up and rattling the cage bars 5 minutes before you let them out. Ferrets will play hard for anywhere from 30 minutes to 5 hours depending on the age of the ferret, before they will crawl back to a cozy spot and sleep. Day or night does not matter.

## **ARE FERRETS INSIDE OR OUTSIDE ANIMALS?**

Inside. Ferrets cannot survive on their own outdoors. They cannot forage for themselves for survival, and they cannot tolerate extreme temperatures. They can be acclimated to cold weather, as long as they have a refuge out of the elements, but they cannot

tolerate higher temperatures. Ferrets are at risk of heat stroke at temperatures or 85 degrees and higher. They cannot sweat, or cool themselves down in any way. If you must keep a ferret in warmer temperatures, try putting bottles of ice, cold water, fans or anything you can think of to keep them cool.

## **WHAT EXACTLY IS A FERRET?**

What exactly is a ferret? There are so many ways to describe a ferret. Ferrets are very playful, kind of like a permanent kitten. They will chase you around, happily engage in ferret games with you, and try to get your attention to play with them if they feel they are being ignored. Ferrets are very affectionate once they have learned to love and trust you. They can also be cuddly. Not all ferrets are cuddly, but the ones that are can just melt your heart. When ferrets have calmed down after a hard play, and they know you and trust you, they can curl up into a ball on your lap and snooze away for hours. Ferrets are very intelligent. They can learn from their mistakes, and rarely make the same mistake more than a few times. They will problem solve, and you would be amazed at just what they can come up with. Now not every ferret is super intelligent, it varies from ferret to ferret, just like people. There are a few dodos out there, but it just makes them more lovable. Ferrets are very personable, and each ferret has its own distinct personality. Some are quiet, some playful and outgoing, but regardless, every ferret is a special ferret. They will amaze and delight you, and provide for hours of fun and companionship for their entire lives. They take a lot of work, but they are more than worth it. Just keep in mind if you are thinking of getting a ferret, they bond to you, and will suffer emotionally if you tire of them and dump them off after a year or two. So please, read up on them, do research, and make sure you have the time, and the energy to have one of these wonderful pets for their entire lifetime.

There is also a wealth of information available on the Internet at <http://www.ferretcentral.org>. This brochure was created by Shelley Knudsen.

If you have any more questions please contact:

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# **WHAT IS A FERRET??**



**What is a ferret? Is it like a rat? Does it smell? Does it bite? Aren't ferrets those vicious wild animals out on the prairie? Is it safe to keep around kids? Where does it come from? Can you keep it like a pet? What do you feed a ferret? Can you litter train a ferret? What is 'ferretproofing'? Do ferrets need shots? Do they need to be spayed or neutered? Don't ferrets sleep all day? Aren't ferrets outside animals? What exactly is a ferret????**

**For answers to these questions and more, please continue reading....**