

# Caring for your ferret



**BVA ANIMAL  
WELFARE  
FOUNDATION**



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## General information

The popularity of ferrets as household pets is growing rapidly. They are intelligent and curious animals that can sleep for a large period of the day. However, when they are awake, they tend to be very active and need stimulation to occupy their time. A ferret can live for an average of eight to 10 years so will require a high level of commitment and care.

## Housing a ferret

A ferret requires a secure area where it can sleep and exercise. This is normally referred to as a court or a cub. A court is a larger enclosure with a private area where the ferret (or ferrets) will sleep, as well an extended area for exercise. The exercise area should incorporate tubes and platforms that your ferret can climb and explore. A cub is a smaller secure enclosure which provides your ferret with a sleeping area and limited exercise space. A cub is acceptable if you plan on taking your ferret out to exercise in a separate area such as your house or garden.

Whichever you choose, you will need to ensure your ferret has a secure, weatherproof and dark area where it can sleep as this is what it will do for most of the day. Commercial bedding is available from various sources; however, it is not advisable to bed your ferret on shredded paper or straw, as this offers little insulation and can lead to health problems.

## Feeding your ferret

Ferrets will eat on demand so a supply of food should be readily available in your ferret's enclosure. The ideal means of doing this is with a complete biscuit food from a trusted supplier. Your ferret can



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also be fed a supplement of raw or cooked meat such as chicken or rabbit. However, this may not always be suitable in warmer weather when fresh meat can go off quickly. Treats such as egg yolk, cod liver oil and commercial ferret snacks can be given to your ferret in small amounts, but not as an alternative to a balanced diet.

A ferret should also have a continuous supply of fresh water. Ferrets will drink throughout the day, and during periods of play will be seen returning for water at various intervals.

### **'Ferret-proofing' your home and garden**

As ferrets can live both indoors and outdoors, it is wise to ensure the area that they will be playing in is free from hazards and also secure to stop them escaping. A ferret is a naturally curious animal; if there is a hole then it will want to get into it, if there is a shelf then it will want to know what is on it!

Around the home there are lots of things to take into account when preparing for your ferret's playtime. Cables and breakable items should all be moved away from where your ferret is going to play. Any gaps in furniture or flooring should be blocked or sealed, no matter how small. You may think 'a ferret will never get in there' but if you have thought about it then so has your ferret, and it will find a way.

Your ferret will like to dig and burrow so ensure your garden is extremely secure. You can always create a smaller pen or area to exercise your ferret while in the garden; however, ensure that it is not in direct sunlight and has adequate shade.



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## Toilet training

When your ferret is in its court or cub you will notice that it will probably go to the toilet in the same area — ferrets are creatures of habit. This behaviour can be used to your benefit if you allow your ferret to roam around your home. Placing a litter tray or cleanable surface in this area will make tidying up after your ferret as simple as possible. Should your ferret take to going to the toilet in different places, it would be advisable to allow it to go to the toilet before taking it from the enclosure and also to return it regularly to give it opportunities to use the litter.

While your ferret is in its court or cub, it is fine to put wood shavings in the toilet area to absorb moisture and ensure that the area smells fresh. It is not advisable to use sawdust in the sleeping area as this can be very dusty and may also cause irritation to a ferret's mouth and nose when asleep.

## Playtime

When you interact with your ferret you will find it to be a great addition to your family. It's likely to race around looking to involve you (plus other ferrets) with games of hide-and-seek. It will chase you as well as stopping and expecting to be chased in return. Ferrets benefit greatly from having areas to investigate and hide in so the addition of tubes and cloth tunnels all give a ferret the means to exercise as well as areas where it can curl up and have a sleep if it all gets a bit too much.

## Breeding

A female ferret (jill) will come into season in the springtime and again later in the year, normally around late summer or into the autumn.



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Jills physically change by displaying a swelling around the genital area and will remain in this advanced state until they are either mated with by a male (hob) or brought out of season by a hormone suppressant called a 'jill-jab'.

The actual action of mating between ferrets is a very physical process and normally results in the hob using its teeth to grip the jill around the back of the neck. This can result in bleeding and trauma and there is the possibility this may cause life-threatening injuries to the jill. Those who are new to breeding are advised to seek close supervision of an experienced person or vet.

## Neutering

If you don't intend to breed from your ferrets, you should seek advice from your veterinary surgeon as soon as possible about getting them neutered. Neutering the hob will help to calm its temperament, as well as removing the majority of the musky smell that hobs can produce. Neutering in jills is more important as they can suffer from anaemia or other potential infections due to the genital swelling, if allowed to remain in season.

## The use of a GnRH implant

- It doesn't matter if you keep a single ferret or a group/business of ferrets, it is important to meet the husbandry needs of both hobs and jills which may require them to be neutered.
- Whilst surgical neutering is one option, it has been proven that there is a connection between early surgical neutering and complications in the adult life of the ferret with Adrenal Gland Disease.



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- It is now recognised that best practice suggests the use of an implant which can be put into both hobs and jills. The implant is a non-surgical procedure and is completed by the vet in a fraction of the time when compared to surgical neutering.
- Further information is available from your vet by asking about the Deslorelin Acetate implant from a manufacturer called Virbac.
- The use of the implant will stop the ferret from coming into season for approximately 18 months and then the implant can be reapplied.
- Where the implant is effective for both hobs and jills to prevent them coming into season, it will also help prevent the musky smell of the hob (male) ferret and also stop seasonal aggression which can prevent multiple males living together in a group.

### Technical Information

Deslorelin acetate is an injectable gonadotropin releasing hormone super-agonist (GnRH agonist) also known as an LHRH agonist. It stops the production of sex hormones (testosterone and oestrogen).

### Veterinary check-ups

It is advisable to take your ferret for a routine check-up each year. Your vet will be familiar with what a healthy ferret looks like and they will be able to give the best care to your animal, as well as keeping your mind at rest.



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## Healthcare

As ferrets are very active animals (when they are awake) they can injure themselves while they play. It is always wise to supervise the playtime of your ferrets so that you can closely monitor their wellbeing. Should you be worried about your ferret's health then it is important that you seek advice from your vet.

You can also make healthcare part of the daily or weekly routine for your ferret. Keep a log of its size, condition and weight. Keep this information somewhere safe so in the event that you do need to take your ferret to the vet then you have information about your ferret which may help the vet in caring for your animal.

Ferrets are very clean animals and will spend a good portion of their time awake cleaning themselves. As ferrets are very susceptible to ear mites, it may be necessary for you to assist them in regularly checking their ears and cleaning them with a piece of cotton wool dipped in warm water. Never insert or poke anything into the ear of your ferret; do not use cotton buds or anything that goes into the ear canal. You will also need to regularly clip your ferret's claws. With some experience the clipping of claws is an easy action to master. However, for the first few attempts your vet will be able to help you and show you what is needed.

## Common ferret questions

### Q Do ferrets bite?

A Every animal has the ability to bite but as long as ferrets are well cared for and handled properly then they have no reason to bite.

### Q Do ferrets live better as a group?

A Some ferrets prefer to live as individuals and these ferrets will require greater interaction with their owners to keep them occupied and stimulated. Ferrets which are kept together have the advantage of keeping each other company and having another ferret to play with.

### Q Are ferrets expensive and difficult to keep?

A Keeping a ferret is no more complicated or costly than keeping a rabbit or a guinea pig.

### Q I have heard of people taking ferrets for walks. Is this true?

A Ferrets love exercise and taking a ferret for a walk on a lead and a harness is very good for it. Ferrets are at risk from Canine Distemper so if you do plan on taking your ferret for a walk get it vaccinated beforehand.

## BVA Animal Welfare Foundation

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