**YVCipedia SMALL MAMMAL**

Ferret Care Sheet

## **Species Overview**

Ferrets (*Mustela putorius furo*) are small, slender carnivores belonging to the weasel family. Typically measuring 13–16 inches in body length and weighing 1.5–4.5 lb, they live approximately 5–8 years, with some reaching up to 10 years in well-cared-for homes. Ferrets are intelligent, curious, and playful—often compared to cats and dogs combined. They thrive on routine and companionship, and can be trained to use a litter box or walk on a leash.

## **Housing & Environment**

A ferret’s cage functions like a crate—secure and comfortable when unsupervised, but not its primary living space. They ideally should have at least 2–4 hours daily outside the cage in a ferret-proofed area. Ferrets love exploring, so it’s vital to block off small openings, electrical cords, and hazardous materials. A multi-level wire cage with solid flooring, hammocks, hideouts, and attached food/water containers works best. Bedding like fleece liners or paper-based products is ideal; avoid cedar, pine shavings, and loose strings.

* Minimum cage size: ~2×2×3 ft, larger preferred
* Daily out-of-cage time: 2–4+ hours supervised
* Flooring: solid with soft bedding; avoid wire
* Bedding: fleece liners, blankets, or paper-based (washed 2–3×/week)
* Cage placement: cool, draft-free (65–75 °F ideal)
* Enrichment: hammocks, tunnels, hideaways, sturdy toys

## **Diet & Nutrition**

Ferrets are obligate carnivores with rapid metabolisms and short digestive tracts. Their diet should consist of high-quality dry ferret food that contains ~30–40% protein and 15–30% fat, with minimal carbohydrates (<5%). Commercial ferret kibble such as Marshall's is preferred over cat food. Treats should be limited to <5% of intake—good options include meat-based items like eggs or freeze-dried organ meat. Avoid sugary fruits, cereals, and dairy. Always introduce new foods gradually, and ensure fresh water is available via both a bottle and bowl.

* Main diet: high-quality dry ferret food (30–40% protein, 15–30% fat) - Marshall's is a great, balanced diet
* Water: dual availability (bowl + sipper bottle), refreshed daily
* Treats: meat-based only, <5% of daily calories
* Avoid: fruits, sugary/starchy foods, dairy, plant proteins

## **Healthcare**

Ferrets should see a veterinarian experienced in exotic pets within 2–4 weeks of adoption and annually thereafter. Vaccinations should be considered: distemper (initial series then annually) and rabies (yearly). Ferrets are vaccine-sensitive, so requirements of vaccines and how they are administered is considered on a case-by-case basis. Common health issues include adrenal disease, insulinomas, dental disease, GI obstructions, and lymphomas. Early detection is crucial—watch for weight loss, lethargy, diarrhea, vomiting, or changes in behavior.

* Vet exam: first visit 2–4 weeks post-adoption, annual thereafter
* Vaccinations: distemper (starting at 6–14 weeks, then annually), rabies yearly
* Record observation period post-vaccine (15–30 minutes)
* Common conditions: adrenal disease, insulinoma, dental issues, GI foreign bodies, neoplasia

## **Behavior & Handling**

Ferrets are social and bond well with owners and, ideally, another ferret. They are playful and full of energy but can be nippy, particularly when frightened or bored. Handle gently, never by the scruff, and support chest and rump. Ferrets enjoy games, supervised exploration, and may learn tricks or leash-walk if trained young. They also sleep deeply—up to 18 hours a day—and may twitch or shiver upon waking; this is normal and not alarming.

* Socialization: same-sex pairs or human companionship recommended
* Handling: gentle support of body, avoid ear/scruff lifting routinely
* Training: litter box use, harness training, simple commands
* Stress cues: biting, hunching, puffing fur, screeching—calm voice helps

## **Grooming & Enrichment**

Ferrets groom themselves but benefit from occasional baths to remove dirt—no more than once monthly to avoid skin dryness. Brush weekly to reduce loose fur. Nails grow quickly and should be trimmed every 4–6 weeks. Provide plenty of toys, tunnels, and chew options to satisfy their high energy and prevent boredom or destructive behavior.

* Bathing: max once a month with gentle shampoo
* Brushing: weekly to control shedding
* Nails: trim every 4–6 weeks, or as needed
* Enrichment: puzzle feeders, tubes, safe chew toys

## **Fun Facts & FAQs**

* **Ferrets are natural escape artists** and can squeeze into surprisingly small spaces.
* **They love to “dance”** (the “weasel war dance”) when excited—complete with hopping and hopping sideways.
* **Sleeping deeply** may involve twitching or shivering—normal for this burrowing species.
* **Litter-training** is very successful in most ferrets using corner-style boxes.
* **‘Mustela’** means “little thief” due to their habit of hiding small objects.

### **Supplies Checklist**

* Multi-level wire cage with solid flooring
* Fleece liners or paper-based bedding
* Hammocks, tunnels, hideaways
* Litter boxes (corner style) and non-clumping litter
* High-quality dry ferret food
* Water bowl and sipper bottle
* Grooming tools: nail trimmers, brush, ear wipes
* Safe toys: chew, puzzle, and fetch options
* Secure, well-ventilated carrier

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