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## **FERRETS**

### **GENERAL INFORMATION**

There are two varieties of ferrets, based on coloration:

- “Fitch” ferrets are buff with black masks, feet, and tails.
- “Albino” ferrets are white with pink eyes.
- Females are called “Jills” and males are called “Hobs”.
- Baby ferrets are called “Kits:”

Ferrets are born deaf and blind. The period of pregnancy is 42 days. The “kits” eyes and ears open at 3-4 weeks of age. Their temporary teeth begin to erupt at 14 days of age, at which time they begin to eat solid food. The permanent teeth erupt at 47-52 days of age. The “kits” are weaned by the time they are 8 weeks old. They reach their adult weight at 4 months of age. The average life span of a pet ferret is 9 - 10 years.

“Hobs” are usually twice as large as “Jills”, but both sexes undergo weight fluctuations of 30-40% of their body weight. Fat is added in the fall, and lost in the spring.

Ferrets have paired musk producing glands besides the anal opening, which secretes when the animal is angry, excited, or in estrus (heat). These glands may be removed to reduce (not eliminate) the musky odor; which makes them a more pleasant pet. They do not have self-developed sweat glands, and are prone to heat stroke at a temperature above 90 degrees F.

Ferrets typically have good personalities and adapt well to human companionship, particularly if they have been raised from infancy in close human contact:

There is NO natural animosity between the ferret and the dog or cat. They are inquisitive and playful by nature. When given supervised freedom in which to satisfy their innate curiosity (and inclination to burrow), they need no special equipment. Some pet ferrets have even been trained to walk with a leash and harness. Because they tend to urinate and defecate in habitual places, they are easily trained to use a cat litter box.

### **OTHER**

- Kits should be dewormed at the time of initial vaccination.
- Yearly fecal examination should be performed by your veterinarian checking for any intestinal parasites.
- Flea products which are safe for cats should be used on ferrets.
- Ferrets are very susceptible to “ear mites” and should be examined often by the owner when other pets are in the household which could transfer this disease.

### **FERRETS - SEXUALITY, DIET AND VACCINATIONS**

#### **SEXUALITY**

- Ferrets reach sexual maturity in the spring following their birth.
- Usually they are 9 - 12 months of age.

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- Breeding season is from March to August, but ferrets can be bred year-round if the light is controlled at 16 hours each day.

The Hobs' breeding readiness is signaled by the descent of the testicles into the scrotum. The testicles remain in the scrotum ONLY during the breeding season. Unless breeding is planned, CASTRATION is RECOMMENDED at six months of age to decrease aggressiveness and the musky odor.

Onset of "estrus" (heat) in the "Jill" can be recognized by enlargement of the vulva. Ovulation induced by copulation (breeding), and if fertilization fails to occur, a "pseudo-pregnancy" of 42 days will occur. The "Jill" may remain in "estrus" for up to six months if copulation does NOT occur. "Jills" NOT INTENDED for breeding SHOULD BE SPAYED AT 6 MONTHS OF AGE!! Because they remain in "heat" for prolonged periods of time, a condition called HYPERESTROGENEMIA occurs. This causes fragile bones, ANEMIA, Poor Blood Clotting, and sometimes, DEATH!

## **DIET**

- Pet ferrets are easily maintained with commercial cat food (dry) supplemented with occasionally giving cooked liver or meat scraps. Ferrets have little, if any, capacity to digest fiber (basic component of most dog food). They do NOT need to eat mice or other rodents.
- Small bones should be withheld from the diet to prevent becoming lodged in the mouth, stomach, or intestine.
- Fresh water, in either a cup or drinking bottle, should be available at all times.

## **VACCINATIONS**

- Ferrets must be protected against CANINE DISTEMPER, which is contagious from dogs. Canine Distemper is FATAL in ferrets. The first signs include a lack of appetite and watery eyes. Vaccination should be started at 6-8 weeks of age. Booster immunizations must be given each year.
- Rabies vaccination should be administered ONLY BY A VETERINARIAN, beginning at 3 months of age. Yearly boosters are required.
- Ferrets are not susceptible to disease produced by Cat Distemper, Mink Enteritis, Canine Hepatitis, Feline Rhinotracheitis, or Feline Calicivirus. Vaccinations for these diseases are not needed.