

6 Things to Consider Before Acquiring a Ferret

Often ignored for the more popular dogs and cats, ferrets make great pets, too, for the right household. Slightly smaller than a cat, they require about the same time commitment.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Many novice owners don't realize that smaller, exotic pets such as ferrets often require as much time and attention as a dog or cat
- If you're thinking about adding a ferret to your household, the first thing you should do is ensure you can legally own one where you live
- There are many other things to consider if you'll be a first-time ferret parent, for example, did you know these cute little creatures have a strong musky odor?
- Other considerations: ferrets are social and need company; they require daily exercise and room to run; they're thieves and will chew virtually anything; they're meat-eaters (carnivores)

If you're thinking about adding a ferret to your family and you have no experience with them, it's important to realize that like all pets, these wonderful little creatures require special care to keep them happy and healthy.

Estimates are that over 13% of U.S. households include an exotic pet, such as ferrets, rabbits, guinea pigs, reptiles and others.¹ Ferrets are playful and curious animals, requiring about the same time commitment as a cat. The average ferret weighs about 2 pounds and is 20 inches in length.

The following list includes a number of things to consider before deciding if an exotic pet is right for you and your family, the first of which is to ensure ferrets are legal to keep as pets where you live. They are currently prohibited from being purchased or adopted in California, Hawaii, and New York City.

6 Things to Consider Before Acquiring a Ferret

1. **Ferrets have a naturally-occurring, pronounced musky odor** — Ferrets have scent glands that produce a potent, musky-smelling oil. If you're sensitive to odors, you might want to spend some time around a ferret to be sure you can tolerate the smell before you bring one home. Ferrets in the pet trade have all been de-scented, but they still have a distinct musky odor that some people find objectionable.

The good news is that your ferret can be given regular baths in unscented, organic shampoo to help tamp down (but not eliminate) his musky odor. However, it's important not to overdo it, because if his skin gets overly dry, his glands may produce strong-smelling oils to help relieve the dryness.²

2. **They're social creatures** — In the wild, ferrets typically live in groups or colonies. Lonely only pet ferrets will seek humans to hang out with, which is one of the reasons many owners bring home a pair so they can play together and keep each other company. Rarely, two ferrets don't get along, so if you adopt two or more, be sure to supervise their interactions for several days until you're confident you can leave them alone together.

It's also a good idea to make sure your ferrets have equal access to food, toys, hiding spots, and sleeping areas to help prevent fights over territory and resources.

3. **Ferrets require daily exercise, including room to run** — Ferrets aren't "cage ornaments," meaning they can't be left in their habitats for long periods without social interaction and exercise. They're active by nature and enjoy playing with safe toys (e.g., natural feather cat toys, soft cloth baby toys, raw bones, and balls). Take care to avoid toys made with soft rubber, latex or plastic that can be pulled or chewed into pieces by your ferret and swallowed.

Your ferret will also enjoy burrowing and romping through tunnels, and spending time with you. It's important to ensure she has time to explore in a safe, supervised environment daily (some owners ferret-proof an entire room in their home), because a ferret who spends too much time sleeping or sitting in her cage is destined to become bored and overweight.

Ferrets require a large cage, preferably a multiple-level model designed for ferrets that features tunnels and hiding spots. Be sure to add a hammock or two, blankets, a litter pan, and ferret litter. While your ferret may not automatically use a litterbox the way a cat does, most can be litterbox trained.

4. **They're thieves, and chew everything within reach** — The Latin word for ferret, *furittus*, means "little thief," and left unsupervised, will help themselves to all kinds of objects they come across. If it's small enough to carry, it's fair game (think car keys, children's toys, coins, medications, and much more), and they tend to stash their stolen merchandise in closets, under beds, or other hiding spots.

This is why you must ferret-proof your home before bringing your little darling into his new environment. His mischievous behavior can have catastrophic consequences if, for example, he swallows an object that gets stuck in his gastrointestinal (GI) tract, potentially causing a life-threatening obstruction that requires surgical treatment.

Ferrets explore the world with their teeth, and can easily become injured chewing electrical cords, for example. In addition, their long, agile bodies allow them to tuck themselves into spaces you might not think to look, like the back of a dresser drawer, triggering a stressful game of "find the ferret."

Other everyday items that can turn dangerous with a ferret in residence are toilets — always keep lids closed — aquariums, and window screens with holes in them — ferrets can easily slip through small spaces. Even after ferret-proofing your home, you should expect to supervise him when he's roaming around — and again, he'll need quality time to roam your home every day.

5. **Ferrets are carnivores** — Ferrets are meat-eaters like dogs and cats, and while there are dry ferret foods available, most contain too many unnecessary carbohydrates, increasing the risk of obesity and pancreatic issues, including diabetes. As with all ultraprocessed dry pet diets, the extrusion process results in carcinogenic byproducts, including heterocyclic amines and acrylamides.

Ferrets are susceptible to a type of pancreatic tumor called insulinomas, so reducing pancreatic stress by feeding a high-quality, fresh diet is important. A ferret's ancestral diet would include mice and other small

rodents, so a nutritionally balanced, raw food diet mimicking their evolutionary diet is optimal (many exotic vets recommend nutritionally complete raw, meat-based cat foods for ferrets).

Consult with your integrative exotic veterinarian about how to wean your ferret onto a better quality diet if you find that she's "addicted" to dry food. Access to pure, fresh water at all times is also essential.

6. **They're prone to certain health conditions** — In addition to insulinomas, ferrets are susceptible to endocrine issues, such as Cushing's disease or adrenal disease. Many actually develop symptoms similar to metabolic syndrome in people. Because nearly all ferrets have undergone early spay/neuter, they often have sex hormone imbalances, as well as problems regulating thyroid and insulin levels.

Other relatively common health conditions in ferrets are dental problems, aplastic anemia, ferret lymphoma, and ferret dilated cardiomyopathy, a heart condition that can cause sudden death (this may be caused by a lack of taurine from fresh meat in the diet).³

Ferrets sold in pet stores in the U.S. are typically bred in ferret mills (under the same deplorable conditions as puppy mills), and are massively inbred. Inbreeding increases the chances for developing certain diseases. Thankfully, with a little research you can find amazing ferret rescues or ethical breeders who will be happy to show you the living conditions and environment your money is supporting.

Please Be a Knowledgeable, Well-Prepared Ferret Guardian

If you decide to add a ferret to your family, it will be up to you to not only create an emotionally and physically fulfilling environment for your animal companion, but also to continually strive to learn more so you can provide the best life possible. An **integrative exotic veterinarian** can provide wellness care for your pet while giving you additional insights and advice about species-appropriate diets and specific nutritional requirements.

Joining local exotics clubs, such as the **American Federation of Aviculture**, is an excellent way to learn more, and you can also join online forums or volunteer for a local rescue organization. Keep in mind that there are many captive-bred ferrets in need of good homes, so rather than shopping for one (never buy wild caught animals), instead, consider rescuing one from an organization near you.

Sources and References

[PetMD, July 30, 2020](#)

¹ [Supermarket News January 17, 2019](#)

^{2,3} [The Spruce Pets, Ferret: Species Profile](#)
