Basic Ferret Feeding & Nutrition

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Ferrets are carnivores

Ferrets, like cats, are obligate carnivores (meat eaters). They cannot survive without meat in their diet. However, although fresh raw meat is part of the ferret's natural diet, it may contain harmful parasites and micro-organisms that create risks unacceptable to pet owners. Meat is only part of a natural diet: predators eat not only the muscle meat of their prey, they also eat the liver, kidneys, and intestinal tract, and crunch up bones as well. A diet limited to meat alone would cause harmful and eventually fatal nutritional imbalances.

So… what do I feed my ferret?

Not dog food. Ferrets fed only dog food will eventually die of malnutrition. Obligate carnivores have special requirements for several nutrients missing from commercial dog foods. In addition, ferrets are unable to digest the high levels of carbohydrate in dog food. They need to get most of their calories from simple carbohydrates, protein, and fat. Ferrets have such a short intestinal tract they can't eat very much at a time, and therefore need a concentrated diet. They should get most of the calories in their diet from fat, the most concentrated source of energy.

Characteristics of a good ferret diet

A good diet for a ferret has to be:

- high in energy
- high in protein
- low in fiber

Until the 1980's, high quality premium cat foods or commercial ranch mink or fox diets were the only choices for feeding pet ferrets, other than preparing a ration at home by mixing raw or cooked meats with other ingredients. Although ferrets do well on some mink and fox rations, these diets are sold in inconveniently large quantities and are not available everywhere.

Specially formulated ferret diets are now available at pet shops. Most of the original 'ferret foods' were adapted from rations for mink, which have very similar requirements. The major dietary difference between mink and ferrets is that mink naturally eat fish, and ferrets do not. Fish is a major ingredient in all commercial mink rations. Some ferret foods are made with poorly processed frozen fish that give the pellets a flavor unacceptable to many ferrets. Kits that are offered this food at weaning will usually eat it and do well on it, but older ferrets accustomed to other diets often refuse to even taste it, and will starve if offered no other food. The newer ferret diets are formulated with palatability as well as nutritional balance in mind.

Premium quality cat foods sold in pet shops and veterinary clinics are not formulated specifically for ferrets, but most of them are palatable and all of them are nutritionally adequate for pet ferrets. Generic cat foods, sold in grocery and farm supply stores, are NOT good for ferrets. Generic cat foods cost much less than premium foods, but they have some important nutritional deficiencies, and are too low in fat. The ferret has to eat at least twice as much of the cheaper food to get the calories he needs. It is a false economy to buy these products for ferrets.

Finicky ferrets

Ferrets, like some cats, become hooked on a particular flavor or brand of food and are very hard to change, even if the diet they prefer is nutritionally inadequate. It is important to start your young ferret on a good diet that is not likely to become unavailable in the future. The best insurance is to feed a mixture of several kinds of premium quality ferret and cat foods, so that the ferret becomes used to a variety of flavors, and does not insist on one. If one food is temporarily unavailable, the ferret will be accustomed to the other ingredients of his diet and will not notice a big change. Any time you have to drastically change the diet of a ferret, diarrhea and other digestive upsets are likely to follow. The more gradually a change in diet is made, the less upsetting it will be.

Pelleted diets

The best way to feed ferrets is to always leave dry, pelleted food with them. Moist food sours after a few hours, especially in warm weather. This is one of the advantages of a dry diet. Convenience and keeping quality are other advantages, plus the beneficial effect crunchy food has on the ferret's teeth. Ferrets on moist diets develop much more plaque on their teeth sooner than ferrets on the same food fed dry.

Dishes

Ferrets are natural diggers and like to dig their food out of the container, especially if it is filled to the top. The best way to prevent this is to use a deep crockery bowl, or a plastic dish clipped high enough on the side of the cage to make it awkward for the ferret to dig in it. An adult female requires only about a quarter of a cup of food daily, so there is no need to fill the container very full. If you have multiple ferrets, it is better to use several dishes than to try to provide enough food in a single large container.

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Water

Ferrets on dry diets must have a constant supply of water. The volume of water required is about three times the volume of dry pellets eaten. In warm weather they drink much more. Ferrets that have no water for 24 hours will stop eating. Water bottles are a convenient way to keep clean water available, but ferrets prefer to drink from a dish and will drink much more from a dish than from a bottle. A dish of fresh water can be clipped onto the side of the cage, or made available to the ferrets when they get out for exercise. Kits and juveniles will usually play in a dish of water left on the cage floor, contaminating it with food and litter.

Food storage

Proper storage of food is important. Pellets are packaged to protect them from moisture. When the bag is opened, it is your responsibility to do this. Store pelleted food no more than 3 months, even in an unopened bag. If you have only one ferret, you will have to buy small packages of food. These are more expensive than bulk quantities, but the food will be fresh and free of mold. Some ferret foods are packaged in milk-carton type containers that seal quite well after opening. Store the contents of large opened bags in plastic bins with snug fitting lids. Bags of food should never be left in a basement or garage, where they will get damp and eventually moldy. Molds make the food unpalatable, and some produce toxins that can make animals very sick, or occasionally cause death.

Snacks

Snacks are good for ferrets… Ferrets don't need snacks, but owners sometimes need to feel good about themselves by giving their pet a treat. A treat can also be a useful training aid, and may some day make the difference between searching for hours for a sleeping ferret, and having the ferret immediately wake up and come to you when you shake the treat can or box.

Snacks are bad for ferrets… Nutritional problems arise when owners give ferrets the wrong kinds of food as treats. Overfeeding sugary snacks can cause health problems, including obesity, tooth decay, and aggravation of hypoglycemia caused by insulinomas. Remember that some fruits such as raisins, a favorite treat for many ferrets, contain large amounts of sugar. Dairy products, although very palatable to ferrets and nutritionally beneficial, cause diarrhea that can be distressing to the owner. Ferrets may become so passionately fond of certain flavors that they won't eat anything else. Most snack foods are not well balanced. Overindulgence produces malnutrition and obesity.

Good Snacks in Limited Quantities	Snacks to Avoid
• Commercially packaged meat-based cat or ferret treats, especially liver flavor • Cooked eggs • Cooked meat • Freeze-dried muscle or organ meats, available as commercial treats • Linoleic acid coat conditioners (e.g.; Linatone, Drs. Foster & Smith Vitacoat, Ferretone, a few drops daily)	• Marshmallows • Potato chips • Peanut butter • Ice cream • Soft drinks (sodas)

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