Common, but Sometimes Alarming Ferret Behaviors

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Ferrets sometimes do things that make new owners think that their pet has a serious problem.

"He's dead, he's dead!!!" Sometimes ferrets sleep so soundly that they seem to be dead. You can pick them up, shake them, pinch their toes, or thump them on the chest, and they hang from your hand as limp as rags, with their eyes closed. About the time you have run to the car on the way to the nearest emergency veterinary clinic, the ferret sleepily opens its eyes and looks innocently around, wondering what is going on. Some ferrets do this quite commonly and their owners get used to it. Others just do it occasionally, and each time, their person of significance panics because they are afraid their pet is in a coma or has died. If the ferret is warm, has a moist pink mouth, and is breathing regularly but slowly, it is not dead, just sleeping soundly. Comatose ferrets usually drool, have cold extremities, and may stiffen, moan or have convulsions.

"She won't sleep in her own bed." Ferrets like to sleep together for comfort, and in cold weather, for warmth. When given several containers to sleep in, a group of ferrets will usually all get into one. This does not mean that there is anything wrong with the other beds. Whoever gets in first ends up on the bottom, and never suffocates, even though it appears to be a risk.

"The poor little thing's cold." Often when you wake your ferret up and take it out of its cage, it trembles. People sometimes interpret this as fear, or shivering because the room is too cold. Adult ferrets tremble with excitement, anticipation, and probably other pleasurable ferret emotions that we can not adequately describe in words. They rarely shiver with cold, and fear is expressed differently. Don't turn up the heat: ferrets are uncomfortable at ambient temperatures above 70°F. When your pet has had a chance to run around for a few minutes, you will notice that he is no longer trembling, even when you pick him up.

"He's having a seizure!!!" When first released from their cages to play, many ferrets burst out of the door, run and leap and twist in the air, and carelessly collide with solid objects. They might run over to your feet, nip at your shoe, and go on another race around the house, sometimes making soft chuckling noises as they do. (Ferret lovers think this sounds like 'dook, dook, dook,' and they call this happy ferret talk "dooking.")

Ferrets do not try to avoid running into things, probably because their vision is poor and they are moving at high speed. New owners have feared that these ferrets are having convulsions, have rabies, or have gone blind. However, it is normal ferret behavior, expressing exuberance at being let out to play, and is a good indicator that the ferret is feeling well. Ferrets appear to have a very high threshold of pain and truly do not appear to notice bumps that would make most other animals stop and lick the spot that was hurt.

"He must have worms." After using the litter box, most ferrets drag their hindquarters along the floor, the way dogs do when they have impacted anal glands. Owners sometimes take the ferret to a veterinarian thinking she has a problem with its descenting surgery, or that she is itchy because of tapeworms or pinworms, or is constipated, or is losing control of her hind legs. In fact, your ferret is just using your rug for toilet paper, a good reason for locating the litter box on a floor that can easily be washed.

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