

Feeding Pregnant, Nursing & Growing Ferrets

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Jills often have 10 or more kits in their first litter. To conceive this many kits in a litter, the first-time jill must be well-grown and receive high quality protein. All animals on a protein-deficient diet have a low conception rate. Breeding ferrets therefore require more protein in their diet than spayed and neutered pets, and growing kits and lactating jills require a high fat diet with excellent quality protein.

Food and water for the pregnant or lactating jill

In the week before their birth, a large litter may weigh more than 70 grams, in a jill that weighs only 600 grams – this is like a 100-pound woman giving birth to a 12-pound baby, or sextuplets weighing 2 pounds each. The jill must be fed very well during late pregnancy to be able to deliver the kits and nurse them. She needs not only extra protein, but extra calories to nourish herself and the kits before and after delivery.

Nursing jills need 2 or 3 times more water than usual, and they will drink much more from a dish than a water bottle. A jill that does not drink enough will not eat enough, and her milk supply will fail.

Kits are weaned naturally when they are about 6 weeks old. Until then, they get most of their nutrition from their mother's milk, which is very rich in both protein and fat. Cows' milk is about 4% fat, while ferret milk, 3 weeks after birth of the kits, may contain as much as 20% fat. This allows the kits to grow very quickly, but it also drains from the jill energy that must be replaced by feeding her a very high quality diet. Nursing jills must eat 2 or 3 times as much as usual to nourish both themselves and the kits. If they have big litters of more than 10 kits, they will lose weight no matter what you feed them. They just can't take in as much energy as they are expending in making milk for the kits.

Feeding kits

To relieve the nursing jills as much as possible, the babies are offered moist food when they will begin to try it, at 3 weeks of age. Supplementing a nursing jill's pelleted diet with a moist diet once or twice a day increases her food and fluid intake and stimulates milk production. Jills will readily share their food with their kits.

Three-week-old kits can be fed cows' milk and whipping cream, mixed half and half, to supplement (but not replace) their mother's milk if she can't quite manage to keep up with the demands of a large litter. Kits don't learn to drink well from a dish until they are about 4 weeks old, so they must be hand fed until then. Plastic droppers are best for feeding them by hand. If hand feeding is the kits' only source of nutrition, use kitten or puppy milk replacers. They need frequent feeding (at 2- or 3-hour intervals, 24 hours a day) when 2 to 3 weeks old, and after that can get by on 4 meals a day, with gradually increasing quantities of both moist and dry solid food also provided.

Healthy, robust kits have been raised on both ferret diets and premium cat foods. The moist diet is made by softening the regular pellets with enough hot water to make a porridge, which is offered warm to the litter on a flat tray 2 to 4 times a day, depending on your schedule. Up to 10% chicken or beef fat or cooked egg can be added to increase palatability and nutritional value, but be careful not to unbalance the original diet with too much supplementation. Remove food uneaten after an hour. If it is left with the litter, the kits will crawl through it. They will learn to use this wet area for a toilet, interfering with litter training and possibly spreading parasites. The jill will not eat contaminated food if she has any choice.