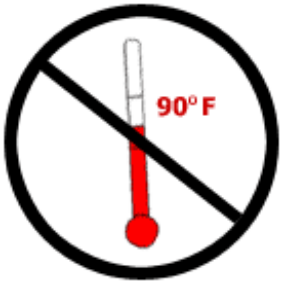
# Heatstroke (Hyperthermia) in Ferrets: Diagnosis, Treatment, and Prevention

*Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff*




Ferrets are extremely prone to heat stress and heatstroke. They will collapse and possibly die if confined at temperatures over 90°F for 10 minutes. Heatstroke can cause permanent damage to internal organs and should be treated by a veterinarian immediately.

What are the signs of heat stress and heatstroke?

Ferrets who are overheated start to breathe through their mouths. As they become even warmer, heatstroke can occur along with the following signs:

- Rapid panting
- Bright red tongue
- Red or pale gums
- Thick, sticky saliva
- Depression
- Weakness
- Dizziness
- Vomiting – sometimes with blood
- Diarrhea
- Shock
- Coma

How should heatstroke be treated?

If you find your ferret panting, remove him from the hot area immediately. Prior to taking him to your veterinarian, lower his temperature by submerging his body in lukewarm water, keeping his head elevated above the water. Then place him on a wet towel and seek veterinary attention immediately. Keep cooling the ferret during transport to the veterinarian by keeping him wet and running the air conditioner or driving with the windows open. **CAUTION**: Cooling must take place gradually. Cooling too quickly or allowing his body temperature to become too low can cause other life-threatening medical conditions. The rectal temperature should be checked every 5 minutes. Once the body temperature is 103°F (high normal), the cooling measures should be stopped. Even if the ferret appears to have recovered before you reach the veterinarian, he should still be examined. He may be dehydrated or have other complications.

Allow free access to water or a children's rehydrating solution if the ferret can drink on his own. Do not try to force-feed cold water; the ferret may inhale it and will choke.

What emergency procedures will be performed by the veterinarian?

Your veterinarian will lower your ferret's body temperature to a safe range (if you have not already) and continually monitor his temperature. Your ferret will be given fluids, and possibly oxygen. The ferret will be monitored for shock, respiratory distress, kidney failure, heart abnormalities, and other complications, and treated accordingly. Blood samples may be taken before and during the treatment. The clotting time of the blood will be monitored, since clotting problems are a common complication.

Aftercare

Ferrets with moderate heatstroke often recover without complicating health problems. Severe heatstroke can cause organ damage that might need ongoing care such as a special diet prescribed by your veterinarian. Ferrets who suffer from heatstroke once may increase their risk for getting it again and steps must be taken to prevent it on hot, humid days.

Prevention

Every effort should be made to keep the environmental temperature below 80°F, even cooler if there is high humidity. Follow these tips to keep your ferret cool:

- Do not leave your ferret in the car, confine him without shade, or confine him to concrete or asphalt surfaces.
- In hot environmental temperatures, restrict exercise, and provide constant access to water.
- Move the ferret to a cool area of the house. Air conditioning is one of the best ways to keep a ferret cool, but is not always dependable. Do not place your ferret directly in front of an air conditioner. Use a fan to circulate the air but, again, do not allow it to blow directly on the ferret.
- Spritzing your ferret with cool water can help maintain a normal body temperature. To provide a cooler environment, freeze water in soda bottles, then wrap them in a towel or tube sock. Place them next to or on top of the cage to cool the surrounding air. The ferret should not have skin contact with the bottles. Watch your ferret to be sure he does not chew on the plastic.



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