Hypoglycemia in Ferrets: Causes and Treatment

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Hypoglycemia means low blood sugar. The muscles and brain depend on blood sugar (glucose) for energy. Severe hypoglycemia is life-threatening, causing weakness and mental confusion, progressing to convulsions and coma.

Hypoglycemia occurs in ferrets under 3 conditions:

- The ferret has an insulin-producing pancreatic tumor (insulinoma)
- The ferret has been deprived of food, particularly babies or pregnant jills
- Occasionally, a ferret on an oral antibiotic, such as amoxicillin, will become hypoglycemic

The signs of hypoglycemia are the same whatever the cause. Ferrets first look confused or 'spacey,' and lie on their bellies with their heads up, staring blankly around as though they were blind or deaf. Normal ferrets will sometimes drop flat on the floor after a wildly active play session, but they get up and go back to their activity after a short rest.

Hypoglycemic ferrets move very slowly and respond poorly to activity nearby. If they try to walk on a polished floor, their hind legs slip sideways with every step. Some salivate and paw at their mouths. Eventually they will lose consciousness and convulse. If your ferret has an attack of hypoglycemia, he should have an appointment with a veterinarian to find the cause.

Meanwhile, you should treat him yourself because you are the closest person and time is important. Owners will learn to recognize the early signs and treat the ferret with a concentrated sugar, such as corn syrup or liquid honey, preferably, a malt-based nutritional supplement such as Nutri-Cal ®, or Doctors Foster & Smith Vitacal® to relieve the condition before it becomes severe. The sugar should be followed by a high protein and fat snack, because sugar induces more insulin production and a second attack of hypoglycemia. Protein and fat are digested more slowly, maintaining the blood sugar at a more normal level after the sugar has had its desired effect. Chicken baby food or finely ground chicken or turkey would be good protein sources.

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