Litter Training Your Ferret

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Ferrets are clean by nature. Adults will avoid soiling their beds or eating areas, although kits are not so fastidious. Ferrets naturally back into corners with their tails raised to urinate or defecate, and usually do both at the same time. Because they have such a short intestine, they feel the need to empty it more frequently than other pets.

'He poops all over the house!' Confine a newly acquired kit to its cage except when it is out for exercise and play with human observation. Provide a litter box in the cage, plus a nest such as a sleeping tube or hammock, and a dish or hopper for food. For the first few days, the kit will back into any corner when it needs to relieve itself. If you're there, you can pick it up when you see this behavior, and put it into the corner of the litter box.

'She just digs all the litter out of the pan!' Kits often think the litter is a wonderful play area and will enthusiastically dig and burrow in it for the first week after adoption. They will get over this when they begin to understand what the litter box is for.

'He goes everywhere in the cage except the litter box.' Kits that are slow learners should be given a litter box that is at least half the area of the cage floor, so that they just about can't avoid using the litter box without fouling their bed or food. Standard cat litter boxes are too high for young ferrets. They need to be cut down until a space on one side is no more than an inch high. Special litter boxes are commercially available for ferrets, with a low side and a guard on the higher sides to prevent the animal backing far enough up to miss the box.

'She uses the litter box in the cage, but she prefers to wait and use the rug in the bathroom.' When you wake your pet for playtime, don't take her (or him) out of the cage until she uses the litter box. The first thing she will do when you let her out, unless you give her a chance to relieve herself in the cage, will be to use the nearest corner (which quickly becomes a favorite spot).

Stay with the kit while she is out, and whenever you see her start to back into a corner, put her in the litter box. You may want to provide several boxes in the room so that the kit will find one when she is some distance from the cage. It doesn't take long for a ferret to decide which corners she prefers, and she will train you to provide toilet facilities in those spots. Some owners allow their pets to use paper in the corners, especially if the ferrets have their own room with a washable floor. The most important thing to remember is that animals learn by repetition, and you cannot expect good results unless you spend time with the ferret when she is young, reinforcing the behavior you prefer.

Litter for ferrets

Ferrets do not cover their stool like cats, so only a thin layer of litter is needed. If more is put in, many ferrets will dig it out. If your ferret habitually digs litter out of the box, try putting less in.

There are 3 types of litter available: regular clay litter, fine clumping litter, and several types of wood products including pellets of recycled paper, shredded paper, and a mixture of very fine cedar and softwood shavings.

Clay litters: Clumping litter and some coarse clay litters are very dusty and can cause sneezing, especially when young kits dig and burrow in it, which most of them do at least a few times. Clumping litter may be so fine that it sticks to the kits' noses (especially if they have runny noses caused by respiratory infections) and interferes with breathing. It may also stick to the vulva of females, causing irritation and increasing their susceptibility to urinary tract infections. Avoid clumping litters for kits. However, mature adults may use clumping litters without a problem, because they just walk onto the litter, relieve themselves, and walk off without either sitting or burrowing in it. It is not the best choice, but can be used in an emergency.

Some clay litters contain odor-controlling substances such as baking soda and perfume. Occasional ferrets and cats object to the perfume, and will suddenly stop using the litter box when you introduce a perfumed litter. It is probably better to avoid perfumed litter.

Paper: Pelleted recycled paper is very good litter for ferrets if it is changed frequently. It has no odor of its own, is very absorptive, and is easy to handle. It is not dusty when fresh, but if the litter box is not emptied of pellets every time it is cleaned, the oldest pellets start to break down and become very dusty. Some ferrets love to dig the pellets out of the box, which makes them break down much faster.

It is possible just to put folded newspaper in the corners of the cage and rooms that the ferrets will live in, and change it frequently. The obvious drawback to this is that paper-trained ferrets do not distinguish between their paper and your unread paper if it is left on the floor.

Shredded paper is very hard to handle when it becomes wet. This makes it difficult to keep the box clean.

Fine softwood shavings: are available with or without cedar. Commercial cat litter that contains cedar has a faint cedar smell that does not appear to bother ferrets, and discourages fleas from entering the cage. The texture of these products is referred to in the trade as 'wood chip', as opposed to 'shred', which is the familiar type of shavings used as bedding for guinea pigs and hamsters. This litter is in the form of tiny squares, and is almost dust-free and very absorbent. It is very light and most kits do not try to dig it out of the box.

'Isn't cedar poisonous?' There is much alarmist discussion about the toxicity of cedar. Cedar oil is undoubtedly toxic - so is

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fluoride, which we use both to kill rats and to prevent cavities in our children's teeth. The difference between a drug and a poison is the dose. Baby aspirin will kill a child who eats enough of it, but given in the correct dose, it is harmless and usually beneficial. The amount of cedar in softwood cat litter is very small and harmless to even young kits. All the ferrets I have had in my home (more than 20 of them) have used this type of cat litter. Most of them have lived for more than 7 years and some for more than 8 years, with no signs of systemic toxic reaction or skin irritation.

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