

Rabies in Ferrets

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Ferrets are susceptible to rabies, but it is a rare disease in this species compared to dogs and especially cats. Part of the reason for this is an inborn resistance to rabies. The occurrence of rabies in closely related wild animals, such as weasels and mink, is very low. Ferrets have very thick, tough skin, and not all bites will penetrate. For rabies virus to be transmitted, the skin must be broken and the wound contaminated with saliva from the rabid animal.

Until 1992, there was no rabies vaccine approved for ferrets. The rabies vaccine now labelled for ferrets, Imrab3, is a killed virus that cannot cause rabies. It is called a 3-year vaccine because dogs and cats require vaccination only every 3 years. However, ferrets must be vaccinated annually.

Recombinant rabies vaccines are also available for dogs and cats, but as yet, they are not approved for use in ferrets.

Baby ferrets born to a rabies-vaccinated jill will acquire passive immunity from her colostrum which will protect them until they are at least 9 or 10 weeks old. Rabies vaccine should be administered when the kits reach 12 weeks of age, and not before. Even ferrets confined to a house or apartment should have a booster every year. Because rabies is a highly fatal disease in all animals including man, rabies vaccination is as much for your protection as that of the animal.

Ferrets that live outside are unobserved most of the time. Although large animals such as raccoons or foxes would be noticed attacking a ferret in a cage, a bat could get through the wire and bite the ferret without anyone being aware of it. In most areas of North America, bat rabies is rare, but there are no areas where you can be absolutely sure bats are free of rabies. This is one of several good reasons not to [house ferrets](#) outside.

The American Veterinary Medical Association lists the ferret in the same category as dogs and cats, i.e., instead of immediate euthanasia and rabies testing in the event that a vaccinated pet ferret bites or scratches someone, the animal may be quarantined for 10 days. However, local authorities do not necessarily know about or agree with this decision and continue to carry out their own policies. Some states and some cities within states categorize ferrets as wild animals. In these areas, a ferret that bites someone, however innocently, and whether or not it has been vaccinated for rabies, will be subjected to a test for rabies. Unfortunately, the only test for rabies requires killing the animal and removing its brain.

Additional Information on Rabies from the Editor: If an animal is bitten by a rabid animal, in most species, the virus will spread through the nerves of the bitten animal towards the brain. The virus is relatively slow moving and the average time of incubation from exposure to brain involvement in the ferret is one month. After the virus reaches the brain it then will move to the salivary glands where it can be spread through a bite.

Ferrets with rabies may become either lethargic or hyperactive. They may lick the site of the bite wound. They may also become incoordinated and develop paralysis of the hind legs.