

Examinations & Vaccinations for Adult Ferrets

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Regular veterinary checkups, vaccinations, and other disease prevention measures will help your ferret live a longer and healthier life. Early detection of disease often results in successful treatment, slower progression of the disease, and limits irreversible damage to various organs and systems of the body.

Routine exams and screening

As ferrets age, they become susceptible to several kinds of [cancer](#) such as [insulinomas](#), which are tumors in the pancreas that cause low blood sugar ([hypoglycemia](#)). Early diagnosis reduces the chance that the ferret will someday become severely hypoglycemic when you're not with him, and possibly die before you can treat him. Mild hypoglycemia can be detected by a blood test before the ferret has shown signs of illness. A ferret over 3 years old should have an annual blood glucose test. Different blood tests can also reveal a high white cell count that might mean leukemia, or a high BUN suggesting a kidney problem.

A veterinary check-up once a year can reveal other problems such as [ear mites](#), [fleas](#), [abnormal hair loss](#), [bladder infections](#), blindness, and abdominal masses, that may be reversible with early treatment.

Vaccinations

All healthy ferrets should be vaccinated for [canine distemper](#) and [rabies](#) once a year, even if they do not go outside.

Canine distemper is almost invariably fatal in ferrets. People who contact dogs or walk in a place where an infected dog has urinated can carry the distemper virus to the ferret.

Exposure to rabies is rare, but because it is a fatal disease in man, it is your legal responsibility to take every possible precaution to protect your pet and people who contact it.

Vaccines used in ferrets

Distemper vaccines:

Editor's Note: Since this article was written, the common distemper vaccine used in ferrets (Fervac-D® United Vaccines) is no longer available. The only currently FDA approved canine distemper vaccine for ferrets is Purevax-D by Merial. Galaxy-D made by Schering-Plough has been used for years to vaccinate ferrets, but is not FDA approved since the company has not completed the necessary FDA/USDA testing to obtain the indication for use in ferrets.

Regardless of the vaccine used, the risk of an anaphylactic (sudden allergic) reaction to canine distemper vaccine appears to be higher in ferrets than in dogs. For that reason, the following guidelines should be followed:

- Be aware of the signs of an anaphylactic reaction in ferrets: sudden onset of vomiting, diarrhea, weakness (ferret becomes limp), pale or bluish gums.
- Remain at your veterinarian's office at least 30-60 minutes after the vaccination so your ferret can be monitored for any reaction. These reactions can be life-threatening, and need to be treated immediately.
- Since there could be a delayed reaction, monitor your ferret closely for 24 hours after the vaccination. Schedule the vaccination so that you or someone else will be able to monitor your ferret during this time.
- Be sure veterinary care will be available to you for 24 hours after the vaccination. Know the emergency phone number for your veterinarian and/or emergency clinic in the event your ferret would have a reaction and need immediate attention.

Vaccinations may cause severe reactions in ferrets. Discuss the risk with your veterinarian, and remain at your veterinarian's office at least 30-60 minutes after the vaccination.

Rabies vaccines: There is one killed rabies vaccine labelled for ferrets, Imrab3® (Merial). Imrab1® (Merial) is safe but is not approved for ferrets and should NOT be used. No recombinant rabies vaccines are approved for use in ferrets, and insufficient testing has been done to determine whether they will induce protective immunity in ferrets. As rabies is a fatal disease in man, only the approved vaccine should be used in ferrets. A ferret vaccinated with an unapproved vaccine will certainly be killed for a rabies test if he bites a human being.

Reactions to vaccinations

Some ferrets are allergic to components of distemper or rabies vaccines. Allergic ferrets may show a reaction known as anaphylaxis. Within minutes of being vaccinated, the ferret begins vomiting, and may also have diarrhea. Some go limp and may lose consciousness. Ferrets that have this reaction once will not necessarily have another when given a different vaccine, but it is likely that they will react to the same type of vaccine again. It is wise to remain at the veterinary office for 30-60 minutes after an injection is given to a ferret that once reacted to a vaccine. There is a treatment that works rapidly to reverse the reaction, if given soon after the first signs are noticed. The longer the reaction has been going on, the more difficult it is to reverse it.

An allergic ferret may be treated with oral antihistamine an hour or more before he is vaccinated, to prevent an adverse reaction occurring. Your veterinarian can dispense the correct product and dose when a vaccination is scheduled.

The possibility of a vaccine reaction is not worth the risk of leaving the ferret unvaccinated. There is no effective treatment for distemper. Ferrets rarely die of an allergic reaction, but susceptible ferrets exposed to distemper will die a painful death.

Heartworm prevention

Ferrets that live outside or are taken outside during summer months should be put on [heartworm](#) prevention when the mosquito season starts, or year-round. The medication must be prescribed by a veterinarian.

Dental care

Ferrets eventually develop dental plaque. If this is removed at regular intervals, the teeth will remain healthy. Your veterinarian can check your [ferret's teeth](#) when he (or she) is scheduled for vaccinations.