

Ferrets

At Origin Vets there are a few things we recommended to try and keep your ferret as fit and healthy as possible. We advise on 6-12 monthly health checks to allow the vets to examine your ferret for any health changes. We also have the following advise on various areas of ferret health:



Vaccinations

Canine Distemper Virus

The virus is transmitted via aerosol droplets from an infected ferret or dog when they sneeze or breathe. It may also be transmitted on your hands, clothing or via the ferrets toys or food dishes. The virus can take 7-10 days to show clinical signs. These can start as a rash over their chin, chest and abdomen followed by brown crusts around the eyes. They then develop nasal discharge and signs of a respiratory infection. Sadly the virus is fatal in nearly all ferrets that are not vaccinated.

We advise vaccinating your ferret especially if they share their home with dogs or go on ferret walks.

Distemper vaccine protocol: From 12 weeks of age and then yearly boosters



Very rarely ferrets can have reactions to the vaccines, so we recommend waiting in our clinic for 20-30 mins after the vaccine to ensure your ferret is fine. These reactions are treatable.

Rabies (only if travelling abroad)

Rabies vaccination protocol: From 12 weeks of age and then repeated every 18months

If you plan to travel abroad they must be vaccinated 21 days before the intended date of travel, have a pet passport and be microchipped. However, you must always check the DEFRA website for up to date information as travel requirements are regularly changing.

Microchipping

As you know ferrets are very inquisitive in nature, which can lead them into trouble and becoming lost! Microchipping may help them be reunited with you should they hopefully be found.

At Origin Vets , we use the smallest microchips available at just 8mm long - smaller size of a grain of rice - this is to ensure that there is minimal discomfort for your ferret when the microchip is inserted into the scruff of the neck. This procedure is normally done on the conscious ferret- however if they are a particularly wriggly or small ferret we may recommend using a minor anaesthetic to ensure that the chip is inserted properly. We will register the microchip for you with all your details, but you must ensure that your details are kept up to date. If you need to change your details such as phone number or address then please contact the microchip company who can do this for you.

Flea, tick and mite treatment

Ferrets can become infested with fleas, ticks and mites. Ear mites, in particular, can cause large amounts of black ear wax to be produced which will irritate your ferret.

There are a few products licensed for use in ferrets and most of these are given on the skin at the back of the neck as a spot on. Speak to your vet for the most appropriate treatment to use on your ferret.

Diet

Ferrets are obligate carnivores. They must have animal protein in their diet as they require specific amino acids to keep them healthy. Ideally feed them a diet as close to what their would eat in the wild.

Diet rules :

- **High Protein** - At least 35-40% high quality animal based protein
- **High fats** - At least 30% animal based fats
- **Low in carbohydrates** (less than 25%)
- **Low in fibre** (less than 2.7%)

Raw food (ideally whole prey) is a good choice to feed ferrets. This allows you to choose good quality meat and give your ferret a diet high in protein and low in carbohydrates. Whole prey provides a balanced diet and has been reported to promote good dental hygiene. Remember ferrets like to hide their food so any uneaten raw food must be removed from the cage-especially during hot weather as this invites bacteria to fester, and, if the food is then consumed, it may cause gut upsets. Unused raw food may also attract unwanted flies and insects.



Pelleted (kibble) diets are also suitable. Unfortunately, we are unable to recommend a particular brand. Ensure you check the ingredients and follow the diet rules. Be aware that your ferret will require access to more water on a pelleted diet. Make a pelleted diet fun by scatter feeding or hiding it in toys to encourage natural foraging and mental stimulation.

Neutering *This is a complex area with several options. Please discuss it in depth with your vet before making a fully informed choice.*

Males: There are three options for neutering a male ferret:

- Surgical castration- permanent removal of the testicles
- Surgical vasectomy- removing a section of the sperm duct
- Chemical castration - Implanted with a gonadotrophin releasing hormone

Castration: This is performed under general anaesthetic and is a quick procedure. This can reduce the smell of the ferret and can reduce aggression. Castrated males do not try to mate with females. Removes risk of testicular cancers. May increase the risk of prostatic cysts due imbalance of hormones.

Vasectomy: This is a quick procedure performed under general anaesthetic. It does not reduce smell or aggression, and males will still try to mate with females (but cannot produce offspring). This is a method to bring a female out of her season (see below) however, many males can be violent and the welfare of the female has to be considered. No reduction in testicular cancers. May reverse, it is recommended to send the removed tissue to a laboratory to confirm the correct amount has been removed.

Implant with a gonadotrophin releasing hormone (Suprelorin): This is implanted under the skin of the ferret in between the shoulder blades. The needle is larger than a microchip needle and is often performed under a minor anaesthetic to reduce discomfort and ensure successful implantation. The implant is available for both males and females however the product is only licensed in males. The implant generally lasts 1-2 years, but many are longer. Your ferret will need to have a repeat implant if the testicles/vulva size increased or if sexual behaviour returns. Implanting also reduces the risk of testicular cancers.



Females: An entire female will remain in oestrus (heat) for the whole breeding season (March – October) if she is not mated or chemically brought out of heat. This results in high levels of oestrogen travelling around in her blood. This long-term exposure to oestrogen results in bone marrow suppression and can cause a fatal anaemia. She will become pale, have difficulty breathing and collapse. The first sign of oestrus is a swollen vulva, later accompanied by fur loss over both flanks.

A female ferret **must** be brought out of heat by one of the following:

- Being mated with an entire or vasectomised male
- Being injected with proligestone - known as the 'jill jab'
- Implanted with a gonadotrophin releasing hormone
- Spaying- removal of the reproductive tract

Mated with an entire or vasectomised male: The first may result in unwanted litters and the second may be violent causing deep wounds to the female.

Injection with proligestone: This is usually given when the female shows signs of being in heat i.e. a swollen vulva. The signs of being in heat usually disappear 10 days after the injection and will last the whole breeding season. A few females may require more than one injection per breeding season. Long term repeat use may result in bone marrow suppression. Pyometra (infection) may occur with this injection.

Implanted with a gonadotrophin releasing hormone: see previously. In females with extensive oestrus, they may need to have an injection with proligesterone to first bring them out of season and then implant at a later date. This is to immediately reduce the oestrus induced anaemia. This reduces the risk of uterine and mammary infections and cancers

Spaying: This is a quick procedure performed under general anaesthetic. It can help to reduce aggression and smell. It will permanently stop the risk of oestrus- induced life threatening anaemia. This removes the risk of uterine cancers/infections and reduces the risk of mammary cancers or infections.

Adrenal gland disease (the link with neutering)

The hypothalamus, part of the brain, produces gonadotrophin releasing hormone, which in turn stimulates production of 2 other hormones - follicular stimulating hormone (FSH) and luteinising hormone (LH). These travel to the FSH and LH receptors on the adrenal glands to stimulate the gland to produce the reproductive hormones which travel to the ovaries and testes. The ovaries and testes will then signal back to the brain to stop producing any more LH. This is known as **NEGATIVE FEEDBACK**.



However, when neutered, this negative feedback is removed. The level of FSH and LH in the blood will therefore continue to increase, resulting in over stimulation of these FSH and LH receptors and increased adrenal gland size. The over-stimulated adrenal gland will then produce excessive steroid hormones. These steroid hormones cause hair loss on the tail and both flanks of the ferret, increased thirst and urine production, thin dry skin, distended abdomen and swelling of the vulva in females and prostatic cysts in males which may cause problems for them urinating. The disease can be fatal.

Much of this evidence has been reported in America. It appears to be unique phenomena in ferrets. It mainly occurs in ferrets that have been neutered at a very young age (less than 12 weeks) and who are kept indoors without exposure to natural day length. This prevents their correct circadian rhythm. However, The Netherlands also report many cases of ferrets that have been neutered at a later age also developing adrenal gland disease. Neutered ferrets in the UK are still at risk of this especially if neutered young and not exposed to natural day length. Sadly, Origin Vets are presented with these cases on a regular basis.

Adrenal gland disease can in many cases be treated. However, if left too long, the damage may be irreversible and potentially fatal to your ferret.

Exercise

Ferrets are inquisitive animals and love to exercise. This will help keep them fit and healthy and reduce any onset of osteoarthritis. Obesity is a big problem in ferrets, this is often due to being overfed commercial pelleted diets and a lack of exercise. This will increase the risk of diabetes and also insulinoma. Provide your ferret with daily exercise in a large run and/or daily walks on a ferret harness.



Insurance

Unfortunately we can never predict what may happen to our ferrets so we highly recommend getting pet insurance. A monthly fee can give you peace of mind knowing your pet is covered for the best treatment should anything happen. There are many insurance companies available, so we advise contacting each of them to find a policy that is right for you. We advise a policy that will cover your ferret for its whole lifetime, for chronic illnesses and for the maximum amount that is available. If this is not possible then covering your ferret for as much as you can afford will give you peace of mind should an accident or emergency occur.

