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COMMON DISEASES OF PET FERRETS

What are some of the common diseases of pet ferrets?

Common conditions of pet ferrets include diarrhea, intestinal foreign bodies, parasites, ringworm, and various kinds of cancer.

What are the signs of these diseases?

Diarrhea is not a disease per se, but rather a sign of a gastrointestinal problem. In ferrets, there are several conditions that can result in diarrhea. Internal parasites can be a cause of diarrhea in ferrets. Viruses, although not common, can also cause diarrhea in ferrets. *Helicobacter musteli* is a spirochete-type of bacterium that causes ulcers and diarrhea in ferrets; similar spirochetes cause ulcers in people and dogs. Proliferative colitis is caused by a *Campylobacter* bacterium and is treated with antibiotics.



Intestinal foreign bodies are a common problem in ferrets, especially young ferrets less than one year old. Being curious creatures, ferrets commonly investigate, chew, and swallow many objects; most commonly rubber parts of shoes, furniture and mattress stuffing, rubber bands, erasers, and parts of dog and cat toys are chewed and swallowed. These obstructions are difficult to diagnose unless the owner observes the ferret swallowing the object or sees a piece of the object missing. They are hard to identify on routine radiographs (X-rays). Common signs are the same as with many ferret diseases, and include lack of appetite, vomiting, lethargy, diarrhea, and gradual body wasting. Vomiting of a severe, projectile nature is suggestive of a complete obstruction.

Like dogs and cats, ferrets can contract various intestinal parasites, as well as external parasites such as fleas. Yearly microscopic fecal examinations will allow easy diagnosis and treatment. External parasites, such as fleas, ticks, mange, and ear mites, can also infect ferrets.

Ringworm is occasionally seen in ferrets and usually manifests as a circular area of hair loss with slight scaliness along the periphery of the circle. Diagnosis can only be accurately made with a special culture of the skin, scales, and hair. It can be transmitted to other pets and to people, so care should be used in handling infected ferrets.

Unlike dogs and cats, ferrets contract cancer quite readily and early in life. Since early detection is critical to survival, every ferret three years of age and older should have a geriatric screening at least annually. This screening includes a complete blood count and organ profile, radiographs (X-rays) of the chest and abdomen, urinalysis, and an EKG (an electrocardiogram).

There are several types of cancers commonly seen in the pet ferret. These include cancer of the pancreas (called an insulinoma), adrenal gland tumors (often seen in conjunction with the insulinoma), and lymphosarcoma (cancer of the lymph nodes and lymphocytic white blood cells). Other types of cancers can also occur in ferrets; any lump or bump should be immediately aspirated, by your veterinarian, to check for cancer. Treated early, many types of cancers can be cured.

How can I tell if my ferret is sick?

Signs of disease in ferrets may be specific for a certain disease. Most commonly, however, signs are vague and non-specific, such as a ferret with anorexia (lack of appetite) and lethargy, which can be seen with many diseases including intestinal foreign bodies, various causes of diarrhea, and many types of cancer. ANY deviation from normal should be a cause for concern and requires immediate evaluation by your veterinarian.



Adrenal gland disease is quite common in ferrets three years of age and older. Most commonly, the ferret begins to lose hair over its rump and back, which can progress to total baldness. Blood testing or an abdominal ultrasound evaluation can be diagnostic, although the clinical sign of baldness in the absence of primary skin lesions often allows the diagnosis to be made without further testing.

Insulinoma, which is also quite common in ferrets three years of age and older, usually causes weakness or excessive salivating due to lowered blood sugar (glucose) levels. Blood testing is needed for diagnosis. However, since excessive insulin secretion by the pancreatic tumors is not constant, the condition is not always easy to diagnose with a single blood test.

How are ferret diseases treated?

Diarrhea can be treated with several different medications depending upon the cause of the diarrhea. Intestinal parasites are treated with the appropriate deworming medication. Infectious causes of diarrhea in ferrets are treated with antibiotics and occasionally anti-ulcer medication. Owners should avoid home treatment without a proper diagnosis, as many diseases appear similar and mimic each other.

Intestinal foreign bodies usually require immediate surgical removal. Since signs of foreign bodies are very similar to other diseases (such as parasites and infectious causes of diarrhea), early diagnosis and aggressive surgical intervention is important.

Ringworm can be treated much the same as it is in dogs and cats and involves medicated shampooing, topical medications, and oral medication for severe infections. Mild infections often respond to topical therapy alone. Since ringworm appears similar to other skin conditions, correct diagnosis is important before treatment is started.

The various cancers can be treated surgically, medically, or with a combination of both surgical removal of the tumor and medical chemotherapy depending upon the type of cancer involved. Many cancers in ferrets can be treated, but early diagnosis is essential. Insulinomas are often treated with surgery and/or medical therapy. While treatment can help control the signs and improve the quality of life, insulinoma is not usually considered a type of cancer that can be cured. Adrenal tumors can be surgically removed or treated medically in selected cases. In many instances, if the tumor is benign and the ferret is normal except for hair loss, treatment may not be needed. This should be discussed with your veterinarian.

Any of these diseases can be severe enough to cause a loss of appetite and lethargy. When seen, these signs indicate a guarded prognosis and the need for hospitalization and intensive care, which can include fluid therapy and force-feeding.

