



**New Berlin Animal Hospital**  
**3840 S. Moorland Rd.**  
**New Berlin, WI 53151**  
**Office: 262.782.6910**  
**Web Site: NBAnHosp.com**



## **FERRETS – GASTROINTESTINAL DISEASE**

Gastrointestinal disease occurs commonly in ferrets - from dental disease, through gastrointestinal foreign bodies to persistent diarrhea. Some, such as foreign bodies, are readily prevented while others require considerable diagnostic investigation and long term treatment.

### ***Dental disease***

Ferrets 2 years of age and older are commonly affected with dental tartar, gingivitis (gum inflammation) and frank dental decay. These problems are particularly seen in animals fed moist (canned) diets. Regular brushing can help control tartar but many ferrets resist this practice. Most commonly an annual dental cleaning done under gas anesthesia can safely control the problem. The common habit of biting and gnawing objects often prevents the build-up of tartar but can lead to dental damage.



### ***Gastrointestinal foreign bodies***

Ferrets chew with such fervor that rubber or plastic objects are often swallowed, especially by young ferrets. In older animals hairballs are more often the cause of gastric problems. The key features of a gastrointestinal foreign body are lethargy and anorexia (reduced appetite) with or without diarrhea. Interestingly one would expect vomiting to be the main sign, but in many cases it is not. Foreign objects in the small intestine often cause pain and are relatively easy to feel by palpating the abdomen. Objects in the stomach cause less pain and are more difficult to feel in the abdomen. Ferrets rarely pass such foreign bodies. Exploratory surgery of the abdomen is essential after taking x-rays to confirm that signs of a foreign body are present. Gas will be present in the intestine and stomach even if the object cannot obviously be seen. After such surgery with removal of the offending object ferrets should be given soft food for the first 24-48 hours but can be allowed to go home after that time. Gastrointestinal foreign bodies are often difficult to diagnose and are sometimes only diagnosed during exploratory surgery on animals with vague clinical signs.

### ***Parasites***

Gastrointestinal parasites are rarely seen in ferrets but any ferret with diarrhea should have a routine microscopic fecal examination. While gastrointestinal worms are very rarely seen, protozoa such as Giardia or Coccidia may occur. Persistent diarrhea may occur with these and rectal prolapse can be a problem associated with such diarrhea in young animals.

## ***Diarrhea***

Diarrhea can occur with a number of different diseases but some of the most important are: distemper, fatal in ferrets and untreatable; influenza, an important but not fatal disease; and rotavirus, a problem seen in young ferrets in North America. More common and more important, given their zoonotic (transmissible to man) nature, are the organisms *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter*. Viral enteritis is becoming more common in ferrets and causes the green slimy feces seen in ferrets affected with the disorder. Supportive treatment is essential in any case of diarrhea in these small mammals since fluid loss can be fatal. Three other diseases, gastritis, proliferative bowel disease and eosinophilic gastritis are also characterized by diarrhea and are covered in more depth below.



## ***Gastritis***

In man, *Helicobacter* has been identified as a significant factor in stomach ulceration, and similarly in ferrets *Helicobacter mustelae* has been found to be associated with stomach ulceration. In animals stressed by a change of environment and diet, as occurs when moved as a young animal to new owners, this organism can cause ulcers with gastrointestinal bleeding. Treatment for this disease relies on a combination of antibiotics, together with gastrointestinal protectants.

## ***Proliferative bowel disease***

This condition, very similar to a disease with the same name in pigs and proliferative ileitis in hamsters, is caused by an organism known as *Lawsonia intracellularis*. This leads to a thickened lower bowel and rectal prolapse. Indeed rectal prolapse in an older ferret is almost only seen in this disease. Treatment is with antibiotics and an affected animal should make a rapid recovery.

## ***Eosinophilic gastroenteritis***

This condition is rarely seen in ferrets. While food allergy has been suggested in people and dogs affected with the same disease, no such link is obvious in ferrets. It can be investigated using elimination diets. Chronic diarrhea is the classic sign in these cases with or without mucus and sometimes also blood. Differentiation of these causes of diarrhea and wasting can be difficult and supportive care is essential since these small animals are very readily compromised by fluid and nutrient loss.