Treats for Ferrets: Buyer's Guide

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Ferrets are masters of fun. It is truly a joy to watch them willingly explore any object, often with energized antics that quickly turn an ordinary afternoon into an adventure. But while you may be tempted to reward your ferret for the delight and pleasure he brings to your life, consider his dietary needs before you offer any treat. Ferrets have a unique digestive system; therefore, their nutritional needs are different from those of other similar-sized animals. Be careful that the treats you offer do not compromise his diet and overall health.

Your Ferret's Anatomy Dictates His Diet

Like cats, ferrets are obligate carnivores. This means they cannot survive without meat in their diet. It does not mean, however, that ferrets can eat only meat. In truth, a ferret's dietary needs are much more complex than it may at first seem. In the wild, ferrets eat not only the muscle meat of their prey, but also other organs and bones. In fact, a diet limited to strictly meat would cause harmful and eventual fatal nutritional imbalances.

Instead, your ferret's diet should be dictated by his anatomical design. Ferrets have short intestinal tracts. Therefore, food moves through quickly without as much time to be worked on by the digestive enzymes and bacteria. This physiology limits both the amount of food they can digest in one meal and the amount of nutrients they can absorb from that single meal. Ferrets require a diet higher in protein than most animals. Therefore, ferrets need a concentrated diet, rich in protein with a mix of fats and low amounts of carbohydrates (such as sugars and starches). The treats you offer your ferret, if any, should follow the same dietary guidelines.

The Truth About Ferret Treats

Ferrets do not need treats. But, in most instances, neither do humans or other animals. Most snack foods are not nutritionally balanced, if they fulfill any dietary need at all. True, treats can be useful training aids. With ferrets, however, the wrong type of treat can cause serious health problems. For example, though sugars are classified as simple carbohydrates, not all sugars are created equal. In fact, overfeeding of sugary snacks, such as ferret-favorite raisins, can cause obesity, tooth decay, and potentially fatal low blood-sugar levels in ferrets with insulinomas, or insulin-producing tumors.

Health Problems From Inappropriate Treats

- High carbohydrate treats, such as cookies, cereal, and bread, may lead to pancreatic diseases.
- Dairy products, though enjoyed by many ferrets, may cause diarrhea, which could lead to life-threatening dehydration.

In addition, too much of any treat can quickly lead to malnutrition. Ferrets are very small animals; therefore, only a few treats can quickly add up to a large portion of their food intake for the day. Ferrets also have a tendency to become so passionately fond of certain flavors that they won't eat anything else. By rule, the total amount of dietary supplements and treats should not

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be more than 10% of your ferret's daily caloric intake.

Suitable Ferret Treats

You can offer your ferret suitable treats, if you choose. Whether used for training aids or to simply reward your pet for good behavior, there are a variety of treats available that will not hinder your ferret's diet. The trick is to choose high protein, meat-based treats designed specifically for ferrets and offer them only in moderation. Treats are meant to be given on occasion, whether for human or animal; otherwise, they wouldn't be treats.

Suitable ferret treats include:

- Ferret treats, which are meat-based or a combination of meat products with only a small amount of added carbohydrates
- Meat
- Eggs or egg products
- Freeze-dried muscle or organ meat (an ingredient in some commercial treats)
- Baby food meats without added carbohydrates

Keep in mind, however, that even the best treats are not substitutes for what your ferret really craves - your attention. It is easy to overfeed your ferret with treats. After all, each ferret is a cute companion who seems to be continually after our hearts. But informed decisions need to be made about the treats you offer. Also, a strict schedule that limits the amount of treats offered daily should be followed. By doing so, you can reward your pet without compromise to his health. In turn, your ferret's life can be long and healthy, which is the greatest treat of all - for both you and him.

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