Nutrition for Ferrets: Pros/Cons of Natural Diets

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is a **natural diet** right for your ferret?

Until the last 40 years, ferrets were fed what we refer to as a "natural diet," which was similar to the diet of the domestic ferret's wild ancestors. In recent years as ferrets have become more popular, they have been fed commercially prepared ferret, cat, and kitten diets. While this is convenient for us as owners, is it what our ferrets were meant to eat? What exactly is a natural diet, and what are the benefits and concerns associated with it?

Ferrets are carnivores

Ferrets are obligate carnivores, which means that they get their nutrients from a diet high in animal protein and fat. Their diet must be a meat diet, because they are unable to digest vegetable protein. They need food that is very low in carbohydrates, and they get their energy from animal fat. This is why proponents of a natural diet argue that ferrets' bodies are actually designed for a whole prey or raw meat diet.

Ferrets have a short GI tract populated with simple organisms, and they don't absorb nutrients as well as other animals can. They are intended to eat food that provides them with a highly concentrated fat content (calories for energy) and highly digestible meat proteins for maximum nutrition.

While there are a number of high quality kibbles available for ferrets today, many of them contain a high number of grains, corn, and other sources of filler material in addition to vegetable protein. Ferrets who eat diets with excessive vegetable protein can suffer from poor skin and coat quality, decreased growth rates, bladder stones and other conditions.

Insulinoma is also a concern, as a high level of carbohydrates in a ferret's diet puts too much stress on the pancreas. While there is no definitive proof that a diet high in carbohydrates causes insulinoma, it just is not healthy for the beta cells in the pancreas to be overworked. When beta cells work too hard, they become overactive (hypertrophied) and either burn out (stop working altogether) or go to

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neoplasia (cancer).

Myths associated with a natural diet

Before we explore what feeding a natural diet entails, there are a few widespread misconceptions associated with feeding whole prey or raw meat that need to be addressed.

First and most importantly, your ferret will not turn into an aggressive wild animal if you feed a raw diet! Kim Schilling, author of Ferrets for Dummies, draws a great parallel. She points out that cats are great hunters and, at times, vicious hunters, playing with their prey before killing it. They kill countless mice, birds, rabbits, and other wildlife throughout their lives, yet they still remain sweet and cuddly companion animals that are perfectly happy to sit in your lap, purring and allowing themselves to be petted. It is not going to be any different with ferrets. Eating raw meat isn't going to transform your sweet little girl into a vicious killer.

Many ferret owners point out that diseases could be passed from the prey animal to the ferret. If you are feeding your ferret the dead mouse from your mousetrap, the spread of disease is very likely. However, there are a number of reputable sources for humanely killed, frozen prey animals, and as long as you stick to getting prey from those sources, your ferret should be fine.

Another misconception is that to feed a natural diet, you must feed live prey. This is not true, nor is it even recommended. While some ferrets may be able to catch and kill their prey, the majority are going to take time to adjust to a natural diet, let alone be able to hunt for their own food. Ferrets are fully domesticated after all! Also, if you were to feed live animals, you also risk your ferret being bitten by the prey animal. The point of feeding whole prey is not to allow your ferret to hunt live animals, it is to provide a nutritious diet.

Types of natural diets

We will discuss two types of natural diets in this article - a whole prey diet and a raw carnivore diet. Bones and meat are the staples of a natural diet, regardless of which type you choose to feed.

Whole Prey Diet

A whole prey diet is the most balanced natural diet, and it refers to feeding ferrets pre-killed, frozen prey such as mice, rats and chicks. Ferrets have teeth that are designed for cutting meat and bone, so whole prey provides them with the necessary exercise for teeth and jaws and cleans their teeth and gums. Whole prey also gives your ferret the chance to experience a variety of tastes and textures, so it's enriching as well.

Raw Carnivore Diet

Another natural diet option is a raw carnivore diet, which is a good alternative for ferret owners who are hesitant to feed prey animals to their ferrets. Raw carnivore diets can include commercially prepared diets that contain meat, organs, and bones. They can also include raw or cooked meat like chicken wings, raw liver or

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hearts, and other similar foods. If you are trying to find a raw carnivore diet, look for one that contains all parts of the animal (meat, bone, cartilage, organs) and meat suitable for human consumption. It must be high in fat and protein.

One thing a natural diet is not is just raw or cooked meat. If you feed your ferret only chicken, she will not get the nutrients that she needs. Bones, organs and other parts contain amino acids, calcium, fatty acids, iron and other essential vitamins and minerals that your ferret needs for a balanced, nutritious diet.

Pros & cons of natural diets

As with any practice, there are both pros and cons associated with feeding ferrets a natural diet. If you are considering a natural diet, you should consider this list closely, and speak with your veterinarian about any concerns you may have.

Benefits of a natural diet include:

- Automatically well balanced diet.
- Closest diet possible to what your ferret would eat in the wild.
- High in moisture (unlike kibble).
- Fewer incidents of hairballs and obstructions because of the variation in food consistencies.
- Protein and fat sources are high quality.
- Because you design your ferret's diet, you have more control over what your ferret eats.
- Owners who feed a natural diet report that their ferrets have more energy, plusher coats, better overall dental health, and smaller stool with less of an odor.
- Ferrets in countries that feed a natural diet have significantly lower incidences of insulinomas.

Concerns associated with a natural diet include:

- Must be done correctly or the ferret will become malnourished.
- Can be difficult to switch your ferret over to a natural diet.
- Slight possibility of choking on bones or internal injury from bones.
- Bacteria or parasites could be present if the whole prey isn't from a reputable source.
- Food must be handled carefully or you risk *salmonella* or *e. coli* contamination.
- Can be expensive and inconvenient.

Feeding a natural diet

Before you do anything, it is very important to speak with your veterinarian. Your

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veterinarian will determine what your ferret's nutritional needs are and how healthy your ferret is. Switching foods, especially from a commercial dry kibble diet to a natural diet, can be stressful on a ferret, and you need to make sure your ferret is up to the change. You may need to limit his access to kibble for short periods of time to get him to try the prey or meat, so you will need to make sure that your ferret is not insulinomic and his blood glucose levels are stable. Finally, it's important to keep your veterinarian abreast of any changes in your ferret's care, as it can affect how he or she will treat your ferret.

As with any diet change, switching to a natural diet should be done gradually. There may be a point where you have to completely remove your ferret's kibble, effectively forcing him to try the new food, but this should not be done right away. Start out by giving your ferret meat and meat gravy or broth baby food, if you aren't already, to get him used to eating meat. Once your ferret will eat baby food, you can try giving him some chicken. Move from that to chicken wings, either cooked or raw. Remember, any meat you give your ferret must be free of spices and sauces. Your ferret needs nutrients, not zesty barbecue flavor! Whether or not you feed the meat raw depends on your comfort levels. Once your ferret is comfortable with meat, you can continue to give that to him or you can try whole prey. (If you decide to feed your ferret whole prey, make sure it is fully defrosted.)

If your ferret is refusing to try the meat, here are a few things you can try:

- Drizzle FerreTone on the meat, chicken wing, whole prey, or whatever else you're trying to feed him.
- Be creative with the meat you give him - if he won't eat straight meat, try mixing cut up pieces of it with kibble.
- Use the juices that come from the meat and pour it over their kibble to get them used to the new taste.

You will find that some ferrets are much more easily converted to a natural diet than others. Younger ferrets generally have a quicker transition because they aren't quite as imprinted on their food as older ferrets are. However, whether you're trying to switch over your six month old ferret or your six year old ferret, be patient and remember that different ferrets will like different things.

There is a difference of opinion as to whether all ferrets can be switched to a natural diet. There are some owners who advise removing all kibbles, forcing the ferret to eat the meat, because they believe that all ferrets can be switched over. There are others who will only try until it's obvious that the ferret would rather starve than eat the meat.

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How you go about switching your ferret and how hard you are willing to push is something that you will need to decide for yourself after discussing it thoroughly with your veterinarian.

If you are able to successfully switch your ferret over, be sure to give him a variety of different animals, meats, or other dietary components. The key to doing a natural diet properly is feeding a combination of different foods. Ferrets wouldn't eat only mice in the wild - they would eat anything they could catch - so they shouldn't just eat mice at your house either. You may also want to continue feeding kibble if you are feeding a raw carnivore diet.

A note about natural vs. commercial diets

The point of this article is not to prove that the ferret food industry is evil. While there are ferret diets out there that are not as good as they could be, there are also manufacturers who strive to provide healthy, nutritious diets for our ferrets and work on developing great new foods. Likewise, if you choose to feed a kibble diet, you are not a bad ferret parent. You just need to be aware of the ingredients in the food and what the protein and fat sources are.

It is important you understand that there is no hard evidence a natural diet is better than a kibble diet or vice versa. Much of the information available as to how either diet affects our ferrets is anecdotal, based entirely on ferret owners' personal experiences. Every ferret owner needs to decide what diet will be best for his or her ferret after doing research and discussing the options with an experienced ferret veterinarian.

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