Spaying & Neutering Ferret Facts

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Because most ferrets in the United States come from large scale breeders, the majority of ferrets bred here are neutered or spayed at a very early age. Many states have laws that prevent the sale or ownership of whole or "unaltered" ferrets. However, there are small scale ferret breeders around the country, so there is a chance that you may one day find yourself the owner of an unaltered ferret. If that happens, there are a few things you need to know to properly care for your ferret.

Spaying Females

Unaltered female ferrets are known as "jills," and they are induced ovulators. This means that they will remain in heat (estrus) indefinitely until they are bred and no eggs are released until they mate. This can have disastrous consequences for your jill. The following can occur when your jill is in estrus for longer than three weeks:

- Hair loss
- Weight loss
- Bladder infections
- Bladder stones
- Estrogen toxicity
- Aplastic anemia
- Hemorrhage
- Death

Aplastic anemia, hemorrhage and death are the result of bone marrow failure, which occurs when the high levels of estrogen suppress the production of blood cells in the marrow. Signs of aplastic anemia include:

- Pale gums
- Hind end weakness
- Small areas of bleeding under the skin

If you bring home a jill, get her spayed before she goes into heat for the first time. Jills generally go into heat for the first time the spring after they are born. If you see signs that your jill is going into heat, get her spayed immediately. The longer you wait to spay her after she goes into heat, the more likely she will develop the medical problems described above, and the more dangerous the spaying procedure can be. Spaying is the removal of the ovaries and the uterus, and having her spayed can save your jill's life.

Neutering Males

Unaltered male ferrets are known as "hobs." Hobs have a strong odor and oily skin throughout the breeding season, which starts in early spring and can last up to six months, though most hobs are generally in rut for only about three months. While they are in rut, they mark their territory with a combination of slimy oils and urine that is deposited when they drag themselves across things. They also groom themselves with this combination of oils and urine, which is part of what leads to the strong odor. Hobs tend to have a wide neck and head, and they are significantly larger than neutered males of the same age.

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Though hobs are fairly well-behaved when they interact with humans, they are very aggressive towards other male ferrets, both whole and neutered. While these interactions rarely cause serious damage, they can leave one or both ferrets with some wounds and the potential for serious injury is there. Hobs in rut will also try to mate with any female, whether or not the female is spayed. Because of this aggressive behavior, hobs should always be housed separately in their own cage.

While spaying females is necessary for medical reasons, neutering male ferrets is necessary more for behavioral reasons. However, there are some health issues associated with unaltered males in rut:

- Significant weight gain or loss
- Depression and anxiety that can lead to illness if they are not mated

Hobs reach sexual maturity around the age of eight or nine months, so you will probably want to get your male neutered when he is six months old. This will allow him to reach sexual maturity, but will avoid the rut. Neutering is removal of both testicles, and it is a less invasive procedure than spaying. Once your hob is neutered, you should see a decrease in odor and oils, a slimming of the head and neck, and significant positive behavioral changes.

I have unaltered ferrets - can I breed them?

You could breed your jill or hob, but we highly recommend that you do not. Breeding ferrets is very difficult, and it involves much more than just putting two unaltered ferrets in the same cage. Attempting to breed ferrets when you have no experience can result in the death of both the mother and her kits (baby ferrets) or damage to your hob. Responsible breeders work with more experienced breeders for years before attempting to breed their own personal ferrets. For the safety of your ferrets, keep your jill and hob apart and spay or neuter them when they reach sexual maturity.

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