Litter Train Your Ferret, How to

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

That's right, ferrets can be litter trained! While they usually aren't as consistent about it as cats, ferrets can be trained to use the litter box in their cages and out in the room. However, before we get into the specifics of litter training, it's important to know that many ferrets may never be 100% accurate while roaming around outside of the cage. So if picking up the occasional "accident" is going to bother you, ferrets may not be the pet for you!

Choosing Litter & Litter Pans

Ferrets can be very picky about where they go to the bathroom, which is why it's important that you find a safe litter they like and a litter pan that's big enough.

When picking out a litter for your ferret, think of his health first and make sure the product is safe for ferret use. A lot of ferrets like to "snorkel" in their litter. This means that it's important to find one that is unscented and as dust free as possible. Ferrets have very delicate respiratory systems, and litters that have a strong odor and produce a lot of dust are not healthy for their sensitive lungs.

Ferrets sometimes also wipe their bottoms before they get out of the pan. This means that you should avoid all clumping litters that are not made of wheat or labeled as safe for ferret usage. Other materials will expand when they get wet, which means they can get stuck inside your ferret's rectum or nose, possibly requiring surgery to remove the hardened plug. You will also want to avoid all cedar and pine shavings, as the chemicals they give off are irritating to your ferrets' eyes and can cause respiratory disease and asthma.

So now that you know a few kinds of litters that you shouldn't use, here's what you can use! Good litters include:

- Recycled newspaper pellets
- Denatured wood litter pellets – kiln-dried to remove harmful phenols
- Wood stove pellets – safe for animal usage and made from hardwoods only
- 100% Bentonite Pearl Litter, such as Super Pet Critter Litter
- Alfalfa pellets (rabbit food)

Acceptable litters if you run out of regular litter include:

- Unscented clay cat litter – not clumping only, not recommended for regular use because it can be dusty.
- Shredded newspaper
- Shredded paper towels

Do not use the following litters under any circumstances!

- Clumping clay litters – can cause blockages
- Silica litters – these suck up moisture and can cause damage to mucous membranes
- Scented litters
- Cedar shavings
- Corncob litters – these are too dusty and, if your ferret is in the habit of trying to eat his litter, can cause blockages

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- Wood chips – besides the obvious splinters, they can also contain harmful phenols that can hurt your ferrets' lungs

Litter pans should be large enough that the ferret can comfortably fit all four of his feet in them. You will also want to make sure the litter pan has a low entry, a high back and high sides. Ferrets back up when going to the bathroom, and you may find that they will back their butts right up over the side of a low litter pan!

Training Methods Inside the Cage

First and foremost, you have to teach the ferret what the litter pan is for. Upon coming across a litter pan for the first time, many will look at it as a fun toy to dig in – they snorkel in it, throw it everywhere, sleep in it – you get the picture! You can indicate that the litter pan is a toilet by placing a few feces in one corner and putting a few pieces of "wet" litter around it. Ferrets find their toilet by smell, so if they smell their feces and urine in the litter box, they will realize that that is where they're supposed to go to the bathroom. Never clean the pan out completely – always put those few pieces of used litter back in until the litter training is complete.

Ferrets have a very short digestive system, so food only takes about 3 – 4 hours to go through their bodies. This means that they go to the bathroom a lot! You will usually see your ferret run down to the litter box within five minutes of waking up. Don't let your ferret out of his cage until he has used the pan. With some ferrets, you will have to reach into the cage and place them in the litter box with their nose facing the corner with the used litter. If that doesn't work, try snuggling him for a few minutes after he wakes up (until he has to go), and then placing him back in the cage directly in the litter pan. After awhile, it will become habit for your ferret to use the litter box immediately after he wakes up and before he comes out to play.

A few tips to help you with your training:

- Always fasten the litter pan to the cage in some way – if you don't, your ferret will move it and go to the bathroom next to or behind it.
- If your ferret is going in other corners, limit him to one level of the cage if possible. Put water & food bowls or bedding in the spots you don't want him to go, and cover the rest of the floor with blankets, sleep sacks, etc. This will distinguish those areas as an eating or sleeping place, and most ferrets won't go to the bathroom there.
- If your ferret does have an accident, move the solid waste into the litter box. Clean the area thoroughly with a cleaner that completely eliminates odors. Ferrets find their litter box by smell, so if the area still smells like their feces, they'll use it again.
- Use positive reinforcement – reward the ferret with FerreTone or some other treat when he uses the litter box.
- Scoop the litter box daily and dump it once a week. You may have to do this more often with multiple ferret households. You wouldn't want to use a dirty toilet, and neither does your ferret.
- For ferrets who like to dig in the litter box, give them something else to dig and burrow in. Outside the cage you can use a dig box. Inside the cage give them nice bedding – sleep sacks, nest boxes, etc – to sleep and hide in so they don't do it in the litter box.

Be warned – some ferrets are very good at faking it! Oftentimes, once they associate a treat or getting out of the cage with going to the bathroom, they will pretend to go so you will reward them. If you have a faker, watch his sides when he's in the box. If his sides move, he really is going to the bathroom. Check the box to be sure, and then go ahead and let him out.

Don't hit, yell at, or in any way intimidate a ferret that doesn't go in the appropriate place. This is counterproductive, and will just result in an angry, confused and aggressive ferret. Some people give their ferret a time out if he goes outside the litter box, but you may find you have better results if you just reward the good behavior. You never want to punish a ferret for going outside the litter box after the fact. If you don't witness the act, punishing the ferret later will not help. The ferret's attention span is too short to connect the punishment with the "accident," and he won't know what he's being punished for.

Training Methods Outside the Cage

Even if your ferret is 100% in his cage, it is very unlikely that he will be that good while roaming around the house! There are a few ferrets out there that will go back to their cages to use the litter box, but they are the exception rather than the rule. For this reason, you should always have multiple litter boxes around the area in which the ferret plays. The easiest way to do it is to see where the ferret chooses to go to the bathroom and just put the litter box there.

If you don't want litter boxes all over your house or you have places where litter boxes won't fit, you can use newspaper or puppy training pads, such as Piddle Pads®. Make sure to change them frequently. These also work well for ferrets that refuse to use a litter pan outside the cage. Keep an eye on the puppy pads, and discontinue use immediately if it looks like your ferrets are chewing on them.

During the early stages of litter training, do not let your ferret run around unsupervised. You need to be there to watch the ferret in case he starts to back up in an area that has no litter box. If this happens, just pick the ferret up and place him where you want him to go. After he finishes, give him a reward so he associates going to the bathroom where you want him to go with getting a treat.

One area that many ferrets like to use as a toilet is right in front of the main door to the house. This is the domestic ferret's equivalent to marking the entrance to its "burrow." There's not really anything you can do about this, as it is the ferret's natural instinct. Just put a litter box, newspaper or piddle pad with a holder there and change it frequently.

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For serious offenders, limit their free roam playtimes to about 2 hours. Put them back into the cage to use the litter box and rest, and let them out only after they've gone to the bathroom or after they've slept for a while, whichever works best for your ferrets. This will help to reinforce the idea that out of cage time only happens after they use the litter box.

As with any other ferret training, the key to success with litter training is persistence and patience! Good luck!

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