Ferret FAQs: Grooming Your Ferret

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Do you know how to clip your ferret's nails and how often you should do it? Do you have a regular grooming schedule that you follow? Clipping nails, cleaning ears, and other grooming tasks don't just keep your ferret looking good, they also keep him feeling good. Proper grooming is closely tied to overall health, and the questions in this section will help you with any basic grooming questions you may have.

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Q Do ferrets need to be bathed? If so, how often?

A Some ferret owners never bathe their ferrets unless they get into something or they have fleas. Others bathe their ferrets anywhere from once a month to once a year. It really is a personal owner preference.

What you have to remember is that ferrets' skin produces oil, and bathing a ferret too often will actually result in a more smelly ferret! The more you bathe a ferret, the more oil his skin produces. At the same time, a frequently bathed ferret has drier skin, which makes the ferret scratch more and can cause skin problems. A good rule to follow is no more than once a month.

The main thing you can do to keep the smell to a minimum is to change or wash bedding once a week and to empty litter boxes frequently. Ferrets themselves, unless they are intact (when they

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haven't been neutered), don't really have a strong smell.
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Why does my ferret's tail have blackheads?

Your ferret may be experiencing what is known as "Rat Tail." You can clear this up by cleaning his tail thoroughly with soap and warm water once a day, and every other day cleaning his tail with an over-the-counter acne medication suggested by your veterinarian.

Eventually, the tail will be clean and pink again. After this point, the hair will start to grow back and you can just check it weekly and during seasonal coat changes to make sure that the rat tail isn't coming back.
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Do I need to brush my ferret's teeth?

Yes! Good dental health is even more important for ferrets than it is for us. Bad dental health can lead to periodontal disease, which allows bacteria to enter your ferret's system. This can cause tooth rot abscesses, increased susceptibility to infections, lethargy resulting from low-grade infections, kidney and liver problems, and even heart diseases such as endocarditis or pericarditis. So, as you can see, the ramifications of not maintaining proper dental health are not limited to plaque buildup and problems eating!

Brushing your ferret's teeth can seem like a difficult task at first, and it will take a little getting used to, both for you and your fuzzy! Be gentle with your fuzzy, and understand that the first few times are probably going to be a little alarming for her. You might want to ease into the brushing procedure by scruffing your ferret and just getting her used to having you touching her teeth. So how do you brush a ferret's teeth?

First, wet the bristles of the brush and apply a very small amount

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(slightly larger around than the tip of a pencil eraser) of whatever veterinary dentifrice you've decided to use. If your ferret hates the flavor, you can add a small amount of FerretVite or FerreTone to it to improve its taste.

Second, scruff your ferret, or, if this is your first time or you find it too difficult to do alone, have someone else scruff the ferret.

Third, gently - with minimal pressure - massage the sides and bottoms of the back teeth, working your way up to the canines and incisors. Pay special attention to the molars, as their tongues can't reach back here to clean off the teeth, and plaque and tartar buildup will be significant. Don't try to brush the inside surface of the teeth.

Finally, when you're done, give the ferret some FerreTone, apologize, and watch her give you a dirty look and run away!

The buildup from soft treats and foods should come off easily if you are brushing regularly enough. Ferrets should have their teeth brushed daily. Don't assume that kibble is enough to keep their teeth clean! The kibble forms a kind of paste that tends to stick along the gum line and in between teeth, and brushing regularly helps to remove that.

Brushing at home doesn't mean you never have to take your ferret in for a dental cleaning at the veterinarian! No matter how faithfully you care for your ferret's teeth, you will eventually start to see serious tartar buildup, which is when it's time to head to the veterinarian. If you're not sure what tartar looks like, take a look at your ferret's teeth. If you see what appears to be grayish, greenish spots on your ferret's teeth, that's tartar, and your ferret needs a cleaning. Veterinary visits for a full cleaning (dental prophylaxis) should be done every 6 months, depending on how quickly your ferret's teeth get dirty.
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How do I clip my ferret's nails?

Nails should be trimmed once a month at the very least, though twice a month is better. When ferrets' nails grow too long, they get caught on things, and can even rip completely out. This is obviously very

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painful for the ferret and can get infected. If never trimmed, the ferrets' nails will eventually start to curl under, which again is very painful for the ferret. Frequent trimmings help to keep your ferret's nails healthy and strong.

To clip your ferret's nails, you will need:

- Ferret or cat clippers - scissor style with a notch at the bottom of the blade for the nail are the easiest to use. Avoid using human nail clippers, as they pinch the nail before cutting, and can actually crush it if not sharp enough!
- Styptic pads or gel - accidents do happen, and you need to have something to stop the bleeding when they do. Cornstarch or flour can also be used, but they are not sterile.
- FerreTone or another treat to distract your ferret.

You can cut your ferret's nails by yourself or with a helper. If it's just you, here's what you should do:

Ready all of your supplies! Put your ferret on his back in your lap or on a blanket or bed on a tabletop. Pour a little FerreTone on your ferret's stomach. (Wear old clothes until your ferret gets used to this feeling - he will react when the FerreTone hits his belly, which splashes the FerreTone around!) As your ferret licks off the FerreTone, clip his nails. Not sure where to clip? Look at your ferret's nail - there is a small red line in there called the quick. You want to cut about 1/8" above that. Cut the nail so when the foot is on the floor, the edge of the nail will be parallel to the floor. This will prevent the nail tip from breaking later.

Clipping nails with a helper is obviously a bit easier. Just have your helper scruff the ferret while you clip the nails. Give the ferret some FerreTone after you're done as a reward.

If you run into a ferret who just absolutely hates having his nails cut, you have a couple choices. You can cut a few nails at a time once a day until all nails are finished, you can approach your ferret while he's sleeping and stop as he starts to wake up, or you can wrap your ferret up in a towel. If you use the towel method, leave your ferret's head and one paw sticking out. You will need a helper for this method. He or she will distract your ferret with FerreTone while you clip.

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