Ferret FAQs: Health & Healthcare

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

It is a sad truth that ferrets are prone to many diseases. In order to successfully spot symptoms and identify when a veterinary visit is necessary, it's important to learn as much as possible about the various illnesses and health problems that our ferrets deal with. In this section, you will learn how to find a great veterinarian, what some of the more common symptoms mean, and many more interesting and helpful facts about some of the common health concerns that ferret owners have.

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Q What is Adrenal Disease?

A Adrenal disease, also known as hyperadrenocorticism, occurs when a tumor or neoplasia on the adrenal glands overstimulates one or both glands, causing an oversecretion of the hormones produced naturally. 75 - 80% of ferrets will have adrenal disease at some point in their lives. The most common age at which symptoms appear is 3 years, but ferrets as young as 10 or 11 months have been diagnosed with it.

Diagnosis can be done through symptoms or with the use of the Tennessee Panel, a blood test run by your veterinarian. Symptoms include:

- Hair loss - there are many different patterns, though the most common is starting at the base of the tail and spreading up the back.
- Sexual aggression and mating behavior in neutered males.

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- Swollen vulva in spayed females.
- Change in skin texture - it becomes thin and papery feeling.
- Difficulty urinating for males - this is also a sign of a swollen prostate.

Swift treatment is necessary, and there are a few options.

- **Surgery**
  This is the only way to completely remove the tumor. There is a chance that the tumor will grow back, either on the same side or the other side. Any infected tissue that remains in the ferret will grow and spread. Not all ferrets are surgical candidates. You will need to discuss that with your veterinarian before making any decisions.
- **Lupron Depot Shots**
  There is 1 month, 3 month and 4 month Lupron available. These shots will need to be administered at the given time for the rest of the ferret's life. This option is good for owners who decide they do not want to do surgery, ferrets that are not good surgical candidates, and ferrets that have already had one gland removed.
- **Melatonin**
  Melatonin can be given as an implant or orally, and should be used in conjunction with Lupron when treating adrenal disease.

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My ferret has diarrhea, what should I do?

Ferrets will have strange feces from time to time, and if diarrhea is the only symptom, monitor your ferret closely to make sure he is still eating and drinking. If the diarrhea is gone within 24 hours, everything is probably okay.

However, if the diarrhea lasts for longer than 24 hours, and is a strange color (black, green, yellow) or a strange texture (jelly-like, seedy), make a veterinary appointment immediately. The longer a ferret has diarrhea, the more deyhydrated he gets, and the less he will eat and drink, causing further problems.

A black color means that there is digested blood in the feces, and it is

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usually a sign of gastric ulcers.

Green feces can mean a number of things - the color itself means that the food is going through the system too fast, and it's not being digested properly. Neon green can be a sign of ECE.
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Do ferrets get hairballs? What happens when they do?

Yes! Ferrets can definitely get hairballs, especially during the spring shed season. Hairballs can be very dangerous for ferrets. Ferrets can't vomit up hairballs like cats can, so if they can't pass the hairball in feces, it can get stuck in your ferret's stomach or intestines and form a blockage. Blockages are life threatening conditions that require surgery.

What are the signs of a hairball or blockage?
Do you think your ferret may have a hairball blockage? Some of the signs include:

- Tiny, stringy stool
- Coughing
- Sudden loss of appetite and weight
- Vomiting or dry heaves
- Pawing at mouth
- Rubbing face on the carpet
- Dehydration
- Bloating
- Swollen belly that is painful to the touch

What if the symptoms go away?
Sometimes ferrets will get a floating partial blockage that causes them to exhibit these symptoms only occasionally while other times they are fine. If your ferret starts showing symptoms of a blockage, take him to the veterinarian immediately, even if the symptoms go away! If you aren't already, start giving your ferret a hairball remedy to try and help the hairball pass through your ferret's system, and keep an eye on your ferret's feces to see if he passes it.

How do I prevent hairballs?

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The best way to help prevent hairballs is to give your ferrets a hairball remedy regularly. Once a week is usually fine for most of the year, but during the spring shed, you should give a hairball remedy or a laxative to your ferret at least a few times a week. If your ferret is "blowing" his coat (shedding all of the guard hairs leaving only the soft undercoat), administer the hairball remedy daily.

If you have multiple ferrets but only a few are shedding, you still need to give all of them a hairball remedy. Ferrets groom not only themselves, but their cagemates. So if a non-shedding ferret grooms a shedding ferret, the non-shedding ferret is also at danger of developing hairballs.

To prevent hairballs, you should also wash ferret bedding and vacuum your house frequently. Loose hairs will be lying everywhere, just waiting to stick to your ferret, so keeping the environment clean will help. Brushing your ferret to remove loose hairs also helps.
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Why is my ferret losing hair?

There are a variety of reasons for hair loss on ferrets, but if your ferret is three years of age or older, your first thought should always be Adrenal Disease. Other reasons include:

- Rat Tail (limited to the tail only)
- Skin infections
- Skin conditions
- Parasites, such as ear mites or fleas
- Malnutrition
- Allergies
- Old Age
- Hormonal imbalances
- Stress
- Improper light cycles

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