

## Caring for a Sick Ferret

A ferret's normal temperature should be between 101 and 102 degrees. If your ferret feels abnormally warm to the touch, is acting lethargic or has very warm foot pads, he or she may have a temperature. Make sure your ferret takes in plenty of water or Pedialyte and take he or she to a veterinarian as soon as possible.

Tips to use in caring for a sick ferret:

- Keep your ferret warm, comfortable and separated from any other ferrets until the illness has passed.
- Keep your ferret hydrated.
- Make sure your ferret is eating enough to maintain weight.
- Give your ferret lots of love and attention.

Caring for a sick ferret can be a scary, challenging, and rewarding experience. Whether it is a cold or a life threatening illness, ferrets really benefit from constant attention and love. It is imperative that you contact or take your ferret to a veterinarian any time it is sick. What may start out as a simple cold or flu could turn into pneumonia or dehydration.

Be sure to check with your veterinarian before administering any "over the counter" pet store or human medications. For example, aspirin and other human pain medications can be lethal to a ferret. Human cough or cold medications can also kill or make your ferret very sick if they contain certain ingredients or are given in incorrect dosages. Your veterinarian can tell you which medications are safe and the correct dosages to give. Don't put your ferret's life in jeopardy to save time or money. Below I have listed some tips I have used in caring for ferrets who were recovering from an illness. I am assuming that your ferret has already been to the veterinarian for diagnosis.

- **Keep your ferret warm, comfortable and caged separately from any other ferrets.** If your ferret has a contagious virus, any other ferrets you own could catch it as well. Wash all communal toys and bedding to avoid spreading the virus. You should always have an extra cage available in case separation is needed. Ferrets who are recovering from surgery should also be caged separately to avoid ripping or snagging the stitches during play. Most ferrets want quiet time when they are ill (except for your pampering). Keeping them caged during an illness makes keeping an eye on them a lot easier as well. A sick ferret may curl up under a piece of furniture or under a cabinet for privacy, making it very hard to find them. Make sure your ferret has something warm to snuggle up in as well. Do not place your ferret on a heating pad.
- **Make sure your ferret stays hydrated.** You can tell if your ferret is dehydrated by pulling up the skin on the "scruff" area of the neck and letting the skin fall. If the skin doesn't snap back into place, or takes a long time to snap back, your ferret is probably dehydrated (older ferrets tend to have skin that may naturally snap back slowly. Get to know the normal skin behavior of your ferret.). You can also feel your ferret's tongue and gums to see if they are lacking moisture. Often, ferrets will act disoriented and lethargic if dehydrated. If you suspect your ferret is dehydrated, please take it to a veterinarian. Once a ferret is very dehydrated he or she can not drink enough water to solve the problem. Intravenous or under the skin fluid injections are often needed. Just a few bouts of vomiting or diarrhea can cause dehydration.

To prevent dehydration, give your ferret a mixture of Pedialyte and water to drink (half Pedialyte and half water) following an initial bout of diarrhea, vomiting or not drinking due to malaise. You should give them fluids that are at room temperature. Very cold, refrigerated fluids can cause your ferret stomach upset. You can also use Gatorade and water, however you must dilute it more (three parts water, one part Gatorade) due to the high sugar content. I would recommend using Pedialyte first and then trying Gatorade only if your ferret refuses to drink the Pedialyte.

Try putting the drink mixture in your ferret's water dish, keeping the water in the water bottle pure. If your ferret refuses to drink the Pedialyte mixture, you want to always have plain water available. If your ferret is not taking in any fluids, or is refusing to drink the mixture, you may have to syringe feed the fluids. You must be very careful while doing this, for they can aspirate the fluid and develop an infection. Fill a syringe with Pedialyte and water, scruff your ferret and slowly inject the fluid into the side of their mouth, one small drop at a time. They will usually resist at first, so it may be a long process. Try to angle the syringe tip towards the front of your ferret's mouth, rather than the back. This gives your ferret a chance to swallow the fluid on his or her own. You should try to get your ferret to drink about fifteen milliliters of the solution every three to four hours (if your ferret is not drinking any fluid on his/her own). Check with your veterinarian to find out exactly how much of the fluid mixture you should syringe feed your ferret per day in order to prevent dehydration.

- **Make sure your ferret is taking in food.** If your ferret is recovering from an intestinal virus, low blood sugar, surgery or other disease, he or she may not be eating enough to maintain body weight. If your ferret is refusing to eat on it's own, you may need to hand feed prescription diet canned food or a suitable replacement.

When my ferret became ill with a terrible intestinal virus (possibly ECE) and low blood sugar due to an insulinoma, I used a method suggested by Dr. Bruce H. Williams, DVM (a veterinarian who owns and works with many ferrets and has his own ferret pathology web site- see Favorite Links ) to keep her nourished after her hospital stay. This technique involves hand feeding your ferret Gerber Chicken Baby Food (with the blue label) every three to four hours. The baby food contains easily digestible protein, calories and fat. It is gentle on irritated intestines and is easily absorbed. You can supplement this diet by mixing some softened, ground ferret chow, canned prescription diet or Ferretvite to the baby food. I used the baby food by itself and then fed her a little Ferretvite separately to ensure she was getting enough taurine and other vitamins. You should always warm the baby food in the microwave or on the stove to slightly above room temperature after refrigeration (don't warm it in the glass jar- use a bowl). Always stick your finger in the center of the food to make sure it is not hot.

Ferrets will not generally take to a new food right away, so I had to scruff my ferret and rub a little of the baby food around her mouth and gums to let her taste it. When she didn't seem interested in eating any (in other words she squirmed out of my hands and wiped her mouth all over the carpet), I opened her mouth and placed a very small dab of the food on the roof of her mouth, keeping towards the front of her mouth (do this very carefully, you don't want your ferret to aspirate the baby food). Continue to feed your ferret in this manner until he or she has eaten about one tablespoon (or as much as your ferret will tolerate) of the food per feeding. You should try to feed your ferret every three to four hours, during the day and over night. After a few such feedings, my ferret was licking the baby food off of my fingers. I let her eat as much as she wanted per feeding. It really helped her recover and gain weight. You should always make some dry food available in your ferret's cage as well.

As your ferret's health and appetite improves, start mixing crushed dry ferret food or canned ferret food with the baby food. Finally, when your ferret is feeling better and has gained weight, encourage your ferret to return to his or her normal food by hand feeding small quantities. Moistening the chow with some water and warming it will also encourage your ferret to eat. Continue feeding the baby food as a supplement until your ferret is eating mostly dry food. Eventually, your ferret will begin eating on his or her own again. Hand feeding your ferret during an illness is an excellent way to earn your ferret's trust and administer some much needed attention.

- Give your sick ferret kind words, attention and a song or two. You may feel silly singing to your ferret, but giving your ferret lots of soothing attention goes a long way. A sick ferret may feel depressed or stressed after being alone in his or her cage for extended periods of time. Hold your ferret often, and dish out lots of praise, petting and soft words. When one of my ferrets was critically ill after an intestinal virus and surgery, I would sing her upbeat songs and insert her name into the lyrics. Every time she heard me singing "her song," she would pop her head out from underneath her blanket to see what was going on. It was a great way to connect with her while cooking dinner or doing other things. Moving your ferret's cage to a more localized and less isolated location in the house can help as well. Ferrets are social animals and need to feel connected with the activities of others in their social group (you and your family).

**"You were going to put that  
thermometer  
where?!"**

