

Pets are an important part of the American household. Your pet-owning experience will be most enjoyable if you carefully consider which pet best suits your family, home, and lifestyle. Unfulfilled expectations are a leading cause of pet relinquishment, so make an informed decision. Take time, involve your family, and give careful consideration to the following questions.

What's special about ferrets?

Ferrets have been domesticated for thousands of years. Clean, social, and affectionate, ferrets can make excellent house pets, but require knowledgeable owners because they have special needs. They are naturally curious and are able to establish strong bonds with people. Ferrets normally live between 5 and 9 years.

What choices do you have?

If you are a first-time owner, a single ferret is probably best. Male ferrets tend to be larger and may be twice the size of females.

The most common ferret color is sable — a dark brown coat with a beige undercoat, dark legs and tail, and a dark mask across the eyes. Other ferret colors include Siamese, white-footed, silver, and albino.



What are the special needs of ferrets?

Ferrets are highly social creatures and require a time commitment to maintain their welfare. To be good house pets, ferrets need to be socialized and handled from a young age; establishing familiarity with people may help to control aggressive behavior. A sturdy, escape proof cage is essential to protect your ferret as they are very adept at squeezing through tiny spaces.

Ferret owners should arrange to have their pet de-scented and spayed or neutered. De-scenting, or removal of the anal glands, helps control the naturally strong, musky odor that many people find objectionable. Regular bathing is essential, even when the scent glands are removed. Unneutered male ferrets (hobs) have a very strong, musky odor and are aggressive. Intact, unspayed females (jills) never go out of heat if they are not bred, and this can lead to life-threatening bone marrow disease.

Who will care for your ferret?

As its owner, you will be responsible for your ferret's food, shelter, companionship, exercise, and physical and mental health for the rest of its life. Although children should be involved in caring for a ferret, it is unrealistic to expect them to be solely responsible. An adult must be willing, able, and available to supervise.

Does a ferret fit your lifestyle?

First check with local authorities, because some states and municipalities do not allow ferrets to be kept as pets. Also, while most no-pet clauses apply to dogs and cats, some apply to other pets and this must be considered before you obtain a ferret. Caution should be used when considering ferrets as pets in households with very young children.

Ferrets will adapt to most living conditions if proper housing, food, play, grooming, and exercise are provided. Because of their smaller size, ferrets are often particularly suitable for people who live in smaller homes or apartments. Keep in mind, however, that keeping too many ferrets in a confined environment can result in severe behavioral problems.

Can you afford a ferret?

The purchase price for a ferret can vary tremendously by breed and source. The cost of your ferret, however, is only the first expense incurred for your pet. Ferrets need high quality food, proper housing, mental stimulation (e.g., toys, play time), and regular visits to a veterinarian for preventive care. Other costs may include emergency medical treatment and accessories. Today, pet health insurance is available to help defray unexpected expenses resulting from illness or injury.

Where can you get a ferret?

There are many shelters and humane organizations dedicated to rescuing and finding homes for pet ferrets. While they can be valuable resources for adoption of your ferret, always ask why the ferret has been relinquished before purchasing. Reputable breeders and pet stores may also be good sources for obtaining your pet ferret.

What should look for in a healthy ferret?

When choosing your ferret, look for a bright, alert, and active individual. It should have a shiny, lush hair coat and be plump and well-fed. If any ferrets in a group appear sickly, do not consider adopting even the healthy-looking animals as a pet, as they may develop signs of illness later. Run your hands and eyes over the ferret. Both sides of the ferret should look and feel the same. Look for the ferret to be energetic and inquisitive. A ferret with a dull and rough hair coat, or an animal that is too thin, potbellied, or sluggish, may very well be sick. Check below the tail for dampness; if present, this can indicate diarrhea. Check for parasites such as fleas on the skin. Make sure the place where your potential pet is being housed is clean and

well-maintained. The food and water should be fresh and plentiful. Ask if the ferret has had regular human contact and avoid selecting a ferret that bites hard or frequently during handling.

What must you do to prepare for a ferret?

A proper diet is essential for your pet ferret's health. A good quality ferret food or cat food is a well-balanced dietary choice. Not only is your veterinarian best qualified to evaluate the health of your new companion, but he/she can advise you about nutrition, proper immunization, parasite control, sterilization, socialization, training, grooming, and other care that may be necessary to ensure the welfare of your new pet.

Proper housing for your ferret is extremely important. Ferrets love to chew! Unless you have your eyes on your ferret, do not let it freely roam through your house. Electric cords and furniture are very tempting, dangerous, and expensive chew toys. A cage is necessary for housebreaking your ferret (although many ferrets can be litter box trained). Ferrets are amazing escape artists and will squeeze through small openings or even open cage latches, so be sure to test your cage to keep your ferret securely inside. Ferrets are naturally curious and are likely to crawl into ducts or underneath appliances. These can be dangerous places and difficult or even impossible for you to access and retrieve your pet. If your ferret is allowed to roam in your kitchen, block off access to areas under the stove, refrigerator, and other appliances.

A final word about pets

When you acquire any type of pet, you accept responsibility for the health and welfare of another living thing. You are responsible for your pet's impact on your family, friends, and community. A pet could be part of your life for many years, so invest the time and effort necessary to make your years together happy ones. Choose wisely and enjoy one of life's most rewarding experiences!

More information about pets, pet health, and careers in veterinary medicine is available at www.avma.org

What you should know about Selecting A Ferret



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