Ferrets are inquisitive, lively and charming little creatures and have an average lifespan of 5 to 7 years with the current record being 14 years. The scientific name *Mustela putorius furo* means "little smelly thief." Ferrets are the domesticated form of either the Eastern or Western European polecat. They have been domesticated since at least 300 BC and were originally used for rodent control and to hunt rabbits. The majority of ferrets in the world today are kept as pets either in the house or in outdoor enclosures.

**Handling**

Domestic ferrets are generally easy to handle and usually are not aggressive. However, like all pets, they can become frightened and their first response may be to strike out and protect themselves with their teeth. We do not recommend keeping ferrets in households with children under 6 years of age because of the possibility that the child may inadvertently harm the ferret and an unfortunate accident may result.

Ferrets have poor eyesight and should never be placed in a situation where they might fall over the edge of a high surface. In addition, do not hold ferrets near your face, especially if you are not familiar with his or her behavior yet because a nose can look like a really neat toy to bite if it comes toward the ferret suddenly. Most of the time you need only pick up your ferret and hold him/her in your arms to move him/her from place to place. Sometimes it is useful to scruff your ferret in order to keep him/her still for certain procedures like giving medications, checking the ears, eyes or mouth, or for bathing. To scruff a ferret, grab the skin along the back of the neck firmly and then hold the pet up so that the hind feet cannot touch the ground. Stroke the ferret's underside gently and slowly from top to bottom, which will relax your pet further. Most ferrets become very relaxed with this restraint method. Occasionally a younger ferret or a very frightened animal will object and you will not be able to use this hold.

**Housing**

Like all animals, ferrets need exercise to develop strong bones and muscles. In addition, time out of the cage spent exploring or playing is a healthy mental activity that can help prevent behavioral problems. Ferrets have the physiology and behaviors of a predatory hunter and will play intensely for an hour or so and then sleep deeply for several hours. Although ferrets are nocturnal by nature, they will adjust their activity schedule to yours without much fuss.

The home cage should be a minimum size of 24"x24"x18" high for up to two ferrets. The cage can be multilevel, but avoid steep ramps because ferrets are not natural climbers and could fall and injure themselves. Aquariums are not suitable cages for ferrets because of inadequate air circulation. Make sure the cage is made of a material that will be easy to clean and deodorize and is indestructible to ferrets digging in the corners. The cage floor can be solid, but should be waterproof and easy to clean.
Ferrets should be allowed to exercise in a supervised, ferret-proofed exercise area a minimum of 2 hours a day. This exercise period can be all at once or divided up into two or three play periods. Ferrets in the wild would spend a good deal of time in burrows underground, eating, sleeping and hunting. Think like a ferret, get down on your hands and knees and look for areas that might be attractive to him or her to dig or burrow into. Make sure you block off all escape routes and remove toxic substances such as plants, household cleaners, insecticides and rodenticides. Protect the carpeting from digging with heavy plastic carpet protectors. Keep your pet from burrowing into the bottom of your furniture or mattresses by covering these areas with a solid piece of thin plywood, hardware cloth, or Plexiglas®. The burrowing is not only damaging to the furniture, but the ferret can eat the foam rubber inside and develop a fatal intestinal obstruction. Recliner chairs should be removed because ferrets like to climb into the chairs to sleep and when the chair is reclined, the ferret can be crushed. Some pet stores and internet ferret supply sites sell moveable ferret exercise pens that are great for allowing your pet to have time outside of the cage while being protected from dangerous situations. You can place a mat under the pen to keep the floor clean.

Sleeping Area - In the wild, ferrets would sleep in a dark, warm, dry nest underground. We need to simulate this same environment by providing sleeping material in which a ferret can feel safe. A sleeping area can be as simple as a soft towel, old shirt or cut off trouser leg or blouse sleeve. There are now a wide variety of sleeping paraphernalia for ferrets sold at pet stores such as cloth tubes, tents and hammocks. Occasionally, a ferret will chew on cloth, but this is usually baby behavior and most ferrets grow out of it. If your pet does chew on cloth, remove the item from the cage and use a small cardboard or wooden box with clean straw or hay for a sleeping area. After the ferret matures try the cloth sleeping materials again.

Litter Box - Ferrets can be litter box trained. Ferrets like to use the bathroom in corners or where there is a vertical surface. With this in mind, use a small cat litter box with low sides that can be placed in a corner of the cage or exercise area. Do not use clay or clumping kitty litter in the box because ferrets like to burrow and play in the clean litter and the dust from the clay is damaging to the fur. A pelleted or shredded bedding is preferable because it not only prevents the problems mentioned, but they are often more absorbent and are non-toxic if swallowed. As mentioned, ferrets back up to a vertical surface to defecate and urinate, so only a thin layer of litter is needed or all the waste material will go over the side of the box! Ferrets do not cover up their waste so it will be necessary to change the litter material several times a week to minimize stool odor. If the ferret is allowed to exercise over a large area of the house it will be necessary to place litter boxes in several locations. When ferrets need to go, they will not travel far to take care of the situation!

Toys

Never give your pet ferret any latex or foam rubber toys!!! Ferrets like to chew on and then swallow these products and the result can be a fatal intestinal obstruction. Make sure to remove any access to foam or latex rubber items in your home such as stereo speakers, headphones, rubber soled shoes, pipe insulation, rubber bands and rubber dog, cat or baby toys. Prevent access to the underside of furniture and mattresses because these are also sources of foam rubber. In additional, do not use any toys (like bean bags) that contain items inside such as dried beans, nuts, grains or Styrofoam® pellets.

More appropriate toys are those that simulate the ferrets need for burrows or their attraction to hunting. Appropriate tunnel-type toys would include large cardboard mailing tubes, dryer hose, paper bags and PVC pipe. Toys that simulate moving prey include ping pong balls, small metal cans, golf balls, and small cloth baby toys or feather cat toys on springs that hang. Do not use any cloth toys if your ferret shows an interest in chewing them, but this is usually baby behavior and cloth is not a problem for adults. Remove buttons and eyes from any cloth baby toys.
Diet
Ferrets are obligate carnivores, meaning they are designed to eat prey items, which includes all parts of the killed animal. Plants, including fruits and vegetables, are not a significant part of a natural ferret diet. Ferrets have a very short gastrointestinal (GI) tract and the intestinal flora (the organisms living in the GI tract) are very simple. It takes about 3 to 4 hours for food to go from one end to the other and thus the food eaten must be of very high quality because there is little time to digest and absorb it. Ferrets tend to eat several smaller meals and carry any excess to their dens to eat later.

Because of the short GI tract and the poor absorption of nutrients, ferrets require a diet that is highly concentrated with FAT as the main source of calories (energy) and highly digestible MEAT-BASED PROTEIN. Ferrets should never be fed carbohydrates (such as vegetable, fruit or grains) as the main source of energy in the diet.

A dry ferret diet should contain at least 30% to 40% crude protein and 15% to 20% fat. The protein should be of animal origin and highly digestible. For ferrets, the first three ingredients ideally should be meat-based. Ferrets do not need supplements of any kind if they are being fed a balanced diet.

Vaccinations
Canine Distemper
Canine distemper virus (CDV) is a contagious disease that can be transmitted to ferrets directly from infected animals including dogs, foxes, raccoons and other ferrets, or through contact with infected material such as shoes or clothing. You can bring CDV home if you are in contact with infected material in places such as the woods, a pet store or a breeding facility. Under normal circumstances, risk of exposure is low, but unfortunately, if a ferret contracts CDV it is nearly 100% fatal.

The current recommendation is to have your pet vaccinated for CDV annually, based on risk of exposure. High risk situations for ferrets to become exposed to CDV include ferret shows, exposure to wildlife (especially raccoons and feral dogs), outdoor enclosures, outdoor camping, exposure to pet store animals (e.g. visiting the pet store with your ferret), and ferrets who are constantly introduced to new ferrets (e.g. breeding, open enrollment play groups). Baby ferrets receive a series of vaccinations with the completion at 14-16 weeks of age. Adult ferrets that have never had CDV vaccination will initially receive a series of two boosters, then one annually thereafter. There are CDV vaccines on the market that are labeled for use in ferrets.

Unfortunately, there is the possibility of an anaphylactic reaction to a vaccine in some ferrets. This occurs within a few minutes of the vaccine administration and is generally severe vomiting, diarrhea, weakness, and collapse. Because of this possibility, we require all ferrets receiving vaccines to remain at the veterinary hospital for 30-40 minutes after the vaccine has been given to monitor for any reactions.

Rabies
Rabies is caused by a virus that can affect many species of animals, including man. The virus is shed in the saliva and transmission is usually through a bite wound. It can also be spread through contact of infected saliva with a mucous membrane or any open wound. Since rabies is a human health issue, there are strict local and state regulations that govern the vaccination of most domestic pets for rabies. In some areas of the country, if a ferret bites a human and it was not vaccinated for rabies, the ferret will be confiscated and destroyed so the brain can be examined for the rabies virus. This is the law and your lack of knowledge about it will not protect you or your pet. Please find out before there is a problem what the laws are regarding rabies vaccination and ferret bites in your area. It does not matter if your ferret was never exposed to rabies, the law will prevail. There is one approved one-year vaccination for rabies in ferrets but there is no approved 3-year vaccine. Your pet ferret must be vaccinated for Rabies annually to be legally licensed in NJ.
Common Medical Problems

**Adrenal Disease**
This is a very common disease of ferrets over 2 years of age. It is either a neoplasm (cancer) or hyperplasia (unusually high activity) of the adrenal glands, which are located near the top of each kidney. These glands are part of the endocrine, or hormone-producing system, of the body. For unknown reasons, in ferrets the adrenal glands become diseased and can enlarge and produce excessive amounts of androgens, or sex hormones. This overproduction of hormones results in a variety of signs including a loss of hair, increase in body odor, enlargement of the vulva in spayed females, return of the mating or aggressive urge in neutered males, dry or brittle hair coat, and itchy skin. In addition, some males can develop an enlargement of the prostate gland, which constricts urinary outflow. These ferrets have difficulty urinating and eventually may not be able to urinate at all. There are now many different possibilities for managing adrenal disease. There are a number of medical and surgical options, as well as options that combine surgery and medical treatment.

**Insulinoma**
This is a neoplasm (cancer) of beta cells in the pancreas. This disease is just as common as adrenal disease and often occurs at the same time. The beta cells in the pancreas produce insulin, which acts to move glucose from the bloodstream into the cells. Diabetes is the lack of insulin preventing glucose from getting into the cells, resulting in a high glucose level in the bloodstream. Insulinoma is the opposite, an excessive production of insulin that drives the glucose out of the bloodstream and into the cells too quickly, resulting in a low blood sugar level. This leaves the brain and red blood cells with an insufficient supply of "fuel for energy," which results in weakness, excessive salivation, seizures and eventually death. These signs are seen intermittently because the body is constantly trying to replace the glucose and early in the disease it can successfully do so for periods of time. As the disease progresses, however, the ferret has longer and more frequent periods of abnormal behavior. The treatment for this disease can be medical or surgical to remove as much of the cancer as possible. It is critical to remove as much carbohydrate from the diet as possible as well because carbohydrates will only aggravate the condition.

**Other Cancers**
For unknown reasons, ferrets are prone to a number of other neoplasms in addition to insulinomas and adrenal cancer. Lymphosarcoma is a cancer of the lymphatic system and is the one cancer that can affect ferrets of any age. The treatment is dependent on the cancer and the condition of the pet.

**Foreign Bodies in the Stomach or Intestine**
Ferrets, particularly under one year of age, love to eat foam and latex rubber, which can become lodged in the intestine or stomach. In addition, ferrets over one year of age can develop large masses of hair in the stomach, which also can cause an obstruction. Both of these situations are dangerous and usually require surgery to remove the foreign material. Signs of a foreign body obstruction include lethargy, dehydration, weight loss, diarrhea, vomiting, lack of stools, and a painful abdomen. The best prevention for this problem is to adequately ferret-proof the environment as described previously.

**Epizootic Catarrhal Enteritis (ECE)**
This is the name given to "green slime disease" that has affected ferrets, particularly in pet stores and shelters, since 1993. This commonly involves a new ferret addition to the household. The new ferret is healthy in appearance but the established ferrets in the home get ill with vomiting and diarrhea. It is also possible for you to bring in the disease after exposure to infected ferrets at pet stores or ferret shows. ECE spreads rapidly and ferrets exposed will exhibit signs of disease within 48 to 72 hours. The signs of illness initially can range from vomiting and a soft, green, mucous-coated stool to bloody diarrhea. Once treated, most ferrets recover uneventfully from ECE; however, some ferrets, particularly older ones or those with other disease, can be severely affected. Recovered ferrets and some unaffected ferrets may be carriers.
**Human Influenza**
Ferrets are highly susceptible to the human influenza virus or the "flu." They do not get the common cold, which is caused by another set of viruses. Ferrets can get the flu from humans and humans can contract the flu from ferrets, through contact with respiratory secretions. Adult ferrets develop a watery discharge from the eyes and nose, sneezing, coughing and a fluctuating fever. Occasionally, they also develop diarrhea. They feel miserable for a few days but usually recover uneventfully. Baby ferrets can be more severely affected, so avoid handling baby ferrets if you have the flu. Your veterinarian may prescribe medications to make your pet more comfortable, but antibiotics are not appropriate for this disease as it is viral, not bacterial. Basic supportive care (meeting fluid and nutritional needs) is most important.