

Your Ferret's Diet

By Alicia Drakiotes

You are what you eat! So, as the saying implies, your ferret requires high-quality foods to maintain a plush coat and a healthy body. Since ferrets are such high-energy animals, free feeding (always having food available) is better than rationed feeding. A continuous supply of food is especially important for growing and developing young ferrets. A ferret who's given poor-quality or insufficient amounts of food will be prone to illness and won't be as good-natured. Besides providing the best food, always make sure your ferret has plenty of fresh water.



What should I feed my ferret?

The natural diet of the ferret is rodents, but today, many manufactured foods are available for ferrets. In fact, there are so many that it is hard to know which one is best. Before deciding on which kibble to buy, you need to understand a few facts. First, ferrets are obligate carnivores, like cats. They are meat eaters, requiring a diet high in meat protein (34–36%) and fats (22–28%), with essential minerals such as taurine.

Second, ferrets have a short digestive cycle, making it difficult for them to break down plant proteins such as corn, so you'll want to feed your ferret food that is low in plant proteins. In addition, digesting carbohydrates and glutens like corn requires the ferret's body to emit insulin from the pancreas to counter high blood-sugar levels, which naturally occur from digesting carbohydrates. Some members of the ferret veterinary community suspect that corn-based products included in the manufacturing process for kibbled food may be somewhat responsible for the increased occurrence of insulinoma conditions in domesticated ferrets. To date, though, no studies have been conducted.

So, how do I know which food to buy?

Learn how to decipher the food label. Commonly referred to as the guaranteed analysis, the food listing features the ingredient with the highest percentage first and the least last. As a ferret caretaker, you need to make sure the kibble you buy lists some type of meat (chicken, lamb, poultry by-products, etc.) as the first ingredient, which means meat is the main component. If some type of plant protein (corn, corn meal, corn gluten) is listed as the first ingredient, that food will not be as beneficial to your ferret, since it will be primarily comprised of these "filler" plant proteins.

You should also be aware that the listings reflect raw ingredient averages. None of the food manufacturers tell consumers what nutrients are left in the food after the cooking process. For this reason, I recommend that you supplement the processed kibble with meat-based treats such as bits of cooked chicken or turkey.

It's also a good idea to get ferrets used to eating baby food made of poultry. If your ferret ever becomes ill or requires post-operative care, the baby food is a great short-term food source and is readily available in grocery stores.

Also, try to locate ferret food that contains alternative carbohydrates such as alfalfa or rice, which will be gentler on the ferret's digestive system and allow greater nutrient assimilation.

Stay away from foods that contain dried fruits or vegetables. Ferrets cannot process the fiber of dried fruits, and these foods have been known to cause intestinal blockages. High amounts of vegetable protein in your ferret's diet may prompt bladder stones as well. The amount of fiber in a ferret's diet should be 2–3% percent or less. Ash content should be low, too – less than 7%.

Should I stick to one type of food?

Actually, you should find several types of foods that you feel are good choices for your ferret – and mix them up. Ferrets imprint on their foods at a young age. By mixing several foods, you are limiting the risks associated with change of recipe by food manufacturers. Ferrets have been known to starve themselves when the aroma of their kibble changed because the manufacturer altered the formula. A mix will diminish chances that your ferret will go on a hunger strike if the one food he's been eating has changed or is no longer available.

If you have acquired an older ferret and you want to change his diet, wean him slowly from the former diet onto your preferred foods. Start with a container that seals tightly and add 25% of new food to the old food and gradually increase the percentage of the new food. Making the change gradually will lessen the chance that your ferret will reject the food, and it will allow his digestive tract to adapt to the new food.

Some small kits have great difficulty eating hard kibble. The cause is that they were weaned too early, before they developed the teeth to chew hard food. Within one or two weeks, the kit will be able to eat harder food, but in the meantime, look for a softer, pelleted food and soften it up by misting it with a spray bottle or dampening it (but not soaking it) with water. You will want to gradually get the kit to eat harder and harder food as new teeth erupt, since prolonged feeding of soft foods can cause a prolapsed rectum, a condition which might require correction by your veterinarian.

Can I give my ferret treats?

While ferrets love special treats, be wary of those that contain sugar or sucrose. Overworking the pancreas with sweets may prompt diabetes or insulinoma. Several types of ferret treats are available at pet-supply stores, but you don't have to buy commercial products – small pieces of meat are always a good treat. As mentioned above, fruits and vegetables are poor choices, as are treats that contain seeds, because of the high fiber content. Coat supplements such as Ferretone make a great treat, offer omega-3 fatty acids, and can be used for training purposes with little chance of upsetting the dietary balance.

Finally, make sure your ferret gets plenty of play and exercise so she doesn't turn into a pudgie! Lack of exercise is just as damaging to your pet as it is to humans. With a great diet and plenty of exercise, your new pet ferret can live a long and healthy life.

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