



SO, WHAT
DO FERRETS
EAT?

Hi!

When I talk to ferret owners and would-be owners, by far the most common question is:

"What Do Ferrets Eat?"

So, with help from my wonderful friend Furquin, I wrote this short but hopefully clear and helpful report.

It's based on a combination of my own experiences drawn from 14 years of hands-on ferret ownership, together with research from many, many sources.

So ... please read and enjoy!

All the best

*Nona & Furquin
Perth, Western Australia
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INTRODUCTION

Certainly when I got my first ferret, *Mash*, back in 1994, there were many different views about what ferrets should be fed.

Farmers here in Western Australia and, I would think, around the rest of Australia as well as in England, seemed to think the poor animals should have a diet of bread and milk.


I think the logic was that if they were fed that on a regular basis, they wouldn't be ferocious, blood-thirsty creatures that would lust after the taste of blood!

Huh?

Then there were folk who fed their ferrets canned dog food only; or those who fed them canned cat food or even those cheap boxes of dry cat food from the supermarket. And they even wondered why their ferrets' poop was technicolored!

However when I explained that it was due to the dyes that were in the cheap cat food, they thought I was exaggerating.

Then there were a few people who used to go and buy sacks of rodent food for their ferrets to eat.

"Rodent food?"  I'd squeak and my eyebrows would shoot up in horror at the thought of giving our favorite pets rodent food!

"No!" I would exclaim heatedly. "It is most definitely **NOT** alright to feed them rodent food because" ... *drum roll* ... **"ferrets are NOT RODENTS** so **please** don't ever think of giving your ferret any kind of seed or vegetable as its daily diet."

I would explain that **they are** ... *more drum rolls* ... **MUSTELIDS**, which means they are obligate (i.e. "strict") carnivores.

That means that a ferret was designed to get goodness from

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its diet by eating a large amount of animal-based proteins (i.e. meat) and doesn't get much nutrition from plant-based proteins (like grains, fruit or vegetables)!

A couple of points why ferrets need a special diet ...

- They have a very short intestinal tract, only about 5 times the length of its body. A cat, another obligate carnivore, has an intestinal tract 10 times the length of its body.
- Food usually passes through a ferret's intestine in about 3 hours, compared to the 5-6 hours it takes to go through a cat's gut.
- The food a ferret eats must be highly digestible and concentrated to allow for the short digestion time, and must also be high in animal protein and fat, to help maintain a healthy immune system.

As ferrets have become pets here in Western Australia rather than hunting animals, the ideas of the ferret owner have slowly changed to accept that the old-fashioned food ideas are bad for the poor animals.

So what does a loving ferret owner give his pet? Ferret food? Good quality dry cat food if ferret food can't be found? A natural diet? Plain red meat?

Hopefully this report will give you some ideas of what you want to give your ferret as its regular diet. Do check and find out what you think is best for your pet – speak to your local ferret society, check with your vet, and then make up your own mind.

The points below are only put down as choices which you have – not as hard and fast rules on what you should do – so do consider everything and then make up your own mind.

Remember ... your ferret relies on you to keep it healthy and well so please do your homework properly!

Carnassials

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Open a ferret's mouth and take a look at its teeth.

Whoa, Grandpa Seamus! They surely are big, strong impressive teeth in your mouth 😊



Check out the well-developed carnassials (specialized teeth that form shearing blades to cut up meat, guillotine fashion).

You sure wouldn't want those teeth grabbing your finger or nose or even earlobe unless you knew your ferret was just going to gently chew on them, would you?

And it always amazes me at how incredibly gentle a ferret can be when its giving its owner a little friendly nibble, say, on the earlobe. The power that those jaws COULD pack, but don't, is quite amazing!

Food choices

Eeeny, meeny, miny, mo ... mmmm, what to do?

There are many different thoughts about what ferrets should eat. Some people only feed them dry food; some only fresh meat, while others give them day-old chicks and pinkies (newborn hairless mice).

I believe they are referred to as weener mice/rats here in

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Australia and also in the UK.

It's entirely up to you as to what you want to feed your ferret so do the research and come up with the diet that is good for your ferret and which also suits your lifestyle.

For instance, all my ferrets live in our house. I've given away my cages as they sleep in our chest of drawers and their food and water dishes are kept in the laundry.



My smart hubby made a nice, round hole in the door at the bottom of the pantry in our laundry and we put the ferrets' food in there, just to stop the cats and our dog from eating it.

I have given them good quality dry cat food (Iams chicken) since I first had ferrets, back in 1994, and they haven't suffered from having that.

My vet has always said that their teeth are in wonderful condition because of chewing on the kibble and they thrive on the food.

I've never considered giving them a "natural diet" as it just doesn't suit my lifestyle to feed them day-old chicks or pinkies as ferrets tend to stash food and I didn't want to come across those sorts of things in the chest of drawers where they sleep.

Since they all do very well on their dry food, I have left them on that. I give them occasional fresh meat treat – chicken breast when we are having it ourselves.

They're not crazy about fresh chicken meat but will eat a couple of small cubes of meat if I give it to them. They also have their smoothy (see below) on a daily basis, and enjoy that immensely.

So, like I said, the best thing for you to do is to read through this report, consider all your opinions and then decide which diet you think is the best for your little friend.

Fresh meat



If you're planning to give your ferret a fresh meat diet, you have to think about adding certain minerals or vitamins to the food. We can get an assortment of pet meat from pet stores here in Perth ... kangaroo, beef, mutton and minced chicken.

Mutton is very fatty and can turn your ferret into a chubby bunny who'll waddle around if it's solely fed that. Now, we know ferrets have short GI tracts so need a diet that has fat but too much is no good.

Some people get a whole chook or rabbit, innards et al, and put it through the mincer so that their ferrets can eat everything. You'd probably be right in thinking that would be an ideal diet for your ferret, as it would have all the goodness of the innards, calcium from the bones and muscle meat, all mixed together.

If you only want to give your ferret raw meat, please think about adding a good vitamin/mineral supplement to the food to avoid the possibility of your ferret developing [osteodystrophy](#).

Day-old chicks / baby mice & rats



Day-old chicks? Well, that's up to you. I have known certain people who say that is the best diet for them, as it's what

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mustelids in the wild would eat.

However I've also heard that ferrets can get blockages and bald patches from a diet of day-old chicks, not to mention [hypocalcemia](#) and [actinomycosis](#).

For those interested in giving their ferret a natural diet, there's an interesting article written by Christie Keith on the ExoticHobbyist website. It's called "[Natural Ferret Care](#)" and also lists sites where American readers can get 'natural' food for their ferrets, including Gourmet Rodents.

There is also a lot of information on the About.com site called "[Towards A More Natural Ferret Diet – Whole Prey and Raw Foods](#)" for those who'd like to explore the pros and cons of a natural diet more.

For those of you who'd like to discuss or chat to other like-minded people about a natural diet, you could join the [Natural Ferrets Yahoo Group](#).

To help you further, there is a [Natural Diet Comparison Chart](#) – created by the Ferret Friends of Pittsburgh – of all the various natural diets so you can see which are better for your ferret, if you decide to go down that path.

Now - if you do give your ferrets day-old chicks &/or pinkies, please make sure you check their cages for any food they might stash there. You don't want to leave a festering piece of food there which, if eaten after a day or two, will give your ferret a bad case of "Montezuma's revenge". Something like that could very well be fatal to your ferret.

Insects



Some ferrets love crunching on insects - I remember being totally grossed out when I caught *Friskie* with what I thought were a couple of hairy old twigs sticking out of her mouth until I realized she was chomping on a Huntsman spider. Eeeuuww. I wouldn't let her give me any

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licks for a day or two till her spider-breath dissipated

I guess if you wanted to give your ferrets insects as a treat, then you'd be able to find cans of them at pet stores which also supply food for reptiles.

Premium quality dry cat foods



Food made especially for ferrets is hard to come by here in Western Australia so we have to dish out the premium quality cat food.

The food for an adult ferret needs to have a high meat protein value, around 31-32%, 18% minimum fat and a maximum of 3% for fiber.

The brands of cat food we use here are the chicken versions of *Iams*, *Hills Science Diet*, *Royal Canin* and *Advantage*.

You don't buy them in supermarkets but in pet stores or places like City Farmers (a local one-stop-shop for pet, garden, animal and pool supplies) in Perth.

Some people buy all 3 brands and give their ferrets a mixture. My lot prefer *Iams* and tend to turn their noses up at the other two so I stick with that.

Make sure you **don't** get the Furball type, as that has too much fiber for ferrets to digest.

Kits need food with a higher protein percentage so they should be fed something like *Iams Kitten* when they are weaned, as that has a 34% protein value.



Dry Ferret Food

We are slowly getting some dry ferret food appearing here in Perth now, thank goodness.

The West Australian Ferret & Ferreting Society (WAFFS) have Eagle Pack Ferret Food available

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for their members, and certainly from what I've read on the Internet, it's an excellent brand and has everything a ferret needs for good nutrition.

I've just found out that a new pet store called Pet Stock, which has recently opened nearby, has [Eagle Pack Holistic Ferret Food](#) available so I think I will be buying that to see how my gang flourish with this special mixture!

Another brand, which I've heard is excellent but is unavailable in Perth is [Wysong's Ferret Archtetypal-I & II](#) food.

Certainly ferret owners sing their praises in [testimonials](#) on the Wysong site!

Another brand which I've heard good reports about is [EVO Ferret Food](#) – you can see the analysis of their food on their site and the best thing is that they don't put any grain in their food.

Ferrets can't digest fiber so it'd be a good idea to feed them dry food without any grain listed in the ingredients!

There are quite a number of dry ferret foods which have been around for some time. Again, the Ferret Friends of Pittsburgh have done a [Food Comparison Chart](#), so you'll be able to see what the good quality cat foods and ferret foods have in their ingredients to help you decide which one is the best for your little one!



Fresh chicken meat

In all the years I've had ferrets, I haven't had one who's been keen on red meat. They turn their noses up at any of the meats from pet stores mentioned above and even ground beef from the supermarket, but they'll eat fresh chicken meat.

So, whenever I'm making a recipe that requires chicken breast or boneless thighs, I buy an extra piece so that I can give it to them.

I just cut it up into little pieces, put it on a dish and lock them

all up with it in the bathroom. That way I know they haven't stashed any food around the house and when I open the door, the dog follows me in and eats any leftovers happily.

I was told to give *Mash* raw chicken wings when I first got her. It was something that ferrets were supposed to love and was good for cleaning their teeth at the same time. Hah! After finding the wings nestled in between my pantyhose in my chest of drawers a few times, I put a stop to that pronto! Haven't had one ferret yet who enjoyed crunching on a wing.



Canned foods

Don't feed your ferret canned cat food from the supermarket. There is nothing nutritional in them and will cause dental problems for your pet.

There are premium quality canned cat foods (like *Hill's Science Diet*) but it's not advisable to give them regularly to your ferret either.

However, if you have a ferret which is ill, then you'll probably find that your vet will suggest giving it the Science Diet A/D formula to help improve its health.

With a sick ferret, always be guided by your (ferret knowledgeable) vet's advice rather than going on your own!



No dog food, dry or canned

There is nothing nutritional for a ferret in either dry or canned dog food, so please don't give your ferret either.



No cow's milk

Don't give your ferret cow's milk (like the stuff we drink) as they are lactose intolerant and the milk would cause them to have diarrhea.

You can give them something like [Whiskas Pet Milk](#), as it has low lactose but if you see your ferret's poop looking very loose, then it might be an idea to stop giving it.

I've also been told goat's milk is good for ferrets but when I gave my gang that in their daily smoothy, they all had terrible diarrhea so I threw the carton away.

It's also not advisable to give your ferret any kind of dairy products. However, having said that, I do know of experienced ferret owners who give their ferrets added a little cream to their diet just while their ferret was recuperating from an illness.



No chocolate

Another no no is giving them chocolate, for whatever reason. Theobromine, which is in chocolate, is dangerous to most pets.



And bread and milk? ... No No No!

Like I said earlier ... some people actually think bread and milk is the right diet for ferrets.

Years ago I used to have stand-up arguments with people who criticized me for giving ferrets dry cat food, telling me I was wrong and that bread and milk was the proper diet for them. Amazing!

I'd get one of my ferrets, lift up their lip, show them those sharp canines and say, "See ... they are car-ni-vores" very slowly, but it didn't seem to make a difference.

Arguing with those types was futile. I reckon it's easier to push a boulder uphill. * sigh *



Treats

I read about ferrets having raisins and other bits of fruit for treats. Okay - I guess in very small doses it wouldn't harm your pet but, again, my lot turn their noses up at anything sweet.

Be careful about what you give them and also consider the size, as there have been reports of ferrets having blockages from something as innocent as a piece of carrot which got stuck in their gut.

And please don't shake your head and say it won't happen to my ferret since I'm careful about what she puts in her mouth!

I thought I was careful but one of our ferrets, *Snoopy*, went and ate a DRIED UP OLD OLIVE PIT which was lying in the rubbish bin in the study (who would have thought that!) when she came home after being sterilized! I had no idea why she suddenly went downhill and we wasted a day on treating her for something else and not getting her x-rayed for a blockage.

Thankfully the story had a happy ending but it was touch and go for a while ... you can read the whole story [here](#).

For those of you who want to give treats to your ferrets but you don't know what to give them, these articles should help with your decision ... "[Ferret Nutrition](#)" on the MiamiFerret site; "[Treats](#)" by Erika Matulich; and "[Healthy Treats for your Favorite Ferret](#)" at the Drs Foster & Smith website.

My gang aren't keen on raisins or anything sweet but most of them start drooling when I give our dog chicken-flavored [Strapz Schmakos](#) in the morning!

I give them each a **VERY LITTLE** piece – **and I mean very little** – as I worry about whether they can digest the Schmako. I make sure they each get a piece no bigger than a quarter of the size of the nail on my little finger. Just a tiny piece is enough as a treat!

A couple of my ferrets absolutely love sharing my glass of orange juice in the mornings. I don't mind giving them a couple of licks but am careful not to let them have too much in case it gives them a stomach upset.

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Smoothy

All of my ferrets are crazy about their daily smoothy!



For 6 ferrets, whisk together ...

- 1/2 cup of Whiskas Pet Milk
- one egg yolk
- a squirt of [Nutrigel](#)

If you have fewer ferrets, then adjust the amount of pet milk accordingly. Serve the smoothy at room temperature.

For the American ferret owner, there is a similar product to Nutrigel called [Tomlyn Ferret Nutri-Cal](#).

Be aware that the Nutrigel is sweet so don't squirt too much into the bowl as you don't want to overdo it and cause tooth decay.



Sick Ferrets

If you have a ferret that is, or has been ill, and needs to put on weight, the best thing for that is Duck Soup.

You can find many sites online with Duck Soup recipes – I've listed a couple which I think are good just for you to get an idea about what's needed.

[Miami Ferret's Duck Soup page](#)

[Feeding the Sick Ferret – Bruce Williams, DVM](#)

[Duck Soup & Additives – Ferrets First Foster Home](#)



And don't forget to always have a clean bowl of fresh water available for them!

If they're in the cage, then you can use one of those water bottles but make sure that they work properly ... nothing worse than thinking your ferret is getting enough water and finding out you need to take it to the vet because it suddenly becomes dehydrated!

As Bugs Bunny says, and Furquin would say, if he could

“Th-th-th-that’s all folks!”



DISCLAIMER: This report on What To Feed Your Ferret is only meant to supply general information on what foods you should give your ferret and was obtained either from personal experience with my ferrets, or from books and/or the Internet. It is not meant to be a definitive guide – it is up to you, as the ferret owner, to decide which diet is the best for your ferret to keep it healthy.

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