

Diarrhea

Information for the Ferret Owner

Diarrheas are a significant disease syndrome in ferrets. Everyone has heard of the ‘greenies’ and the potentially fatal nature of the disease. Unfortunately, diarrhea is not as simple and clear cut as many clients believe. As more information becomes known about ferrets, there appears to be many causes of diarrhea.

Diarrhea can be a consequence of abnormal movement of the small and/or large intestinal tract, secretion of fluids, or the lack of absorption by portions of the intestinal tract. Parasites, inflammations, viruses, bacteria, diet changes, diet sensitivities, stress, metabolic diseases and other body infections can all lead to diarrhea. The ferret also has a relatively short intestinal tract and I believe diarrhea occurs more easily than compared to a dog or cat. It is important to isolate as specific a cause as possible to better treat the ferret and to know the potential for recurrence.

When I am presented with a ferret, the pet’s history is very important. How long? How often? Is it better on some foods versus others? Any other ferrets in the house sick? What is the color and consistency of the diarrhea? All these are vital to know to help your pet.

The most important item is the physical examination. Items such as hydration, abdominal organ size, lung sounds, abnormal masses and so forth help the veterinarian better determine the cause of the diarrhea and the level of treatment (at home versus hospitalization) needed short term. Hopefully at this time a prognosis can be given and possible costs associated with treating your pet can be discussed.

In terms of diagnostic testing, I usually start with a stool sample examination both grossly and under the microscope. This helps determine if a parasitic infection is present and also if any intestinal bleeding is occurring. X-rays may also prove beneficial if the veterinarian believes an obstruction may be present.

Treatment covers the following broad categories:

- Correct and maintain the pet’s hydration. Either orally or by injection.
- Treat the diarrhea with anti-diarrheal drugs. Choices can include peptobismol, kapectate or the prescription drug amforal™. Imodium does not seem to be a good choice.
- Treat any intestinal bleeding. Sulcrafate is a prescription drug that is designed to protect stomach and intestinal ulcers.
- Use antibiotics such as amoxicillin. A type of bacteria called *Heliobacter* has been isolated in many ferrets with stomach ulceration. The penicillin types of antibiotics are the drug of choice.
- Treat any parasites. I usually use Panacur™ which can be used also for a type of parasite called *Giardia*.
- Give calories. ‘Duck Soup’, pureed ferret kibble or Prescription Diet™ a/d all work. Force feed if necessary.
- Maintain the body temperature. Use an appropriate type incubator if needed.
- Expect long term therapy in some cases. I routinely have ferrets that take over a month to stop the diarrhea.



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As a last note, any diarrhea of more than three days duration, or where your ferret stops eating or drinking, or where the diarrhea is black and tarry should be immediately seen by a veterinarian. The longer you wait, the more likely the diarrhea and all of its associated changes will prove to be fatal.