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## Medical Problems in Ferrets

The following list is a collection of medical problems that can occur in your pet ferret. This collection is brief and if you would like further information we have more in depth handouts to help answer your questions in regards to any one particular disease.

- **EMERGENCIES** – If you feel that you have an emergency situation with your pet call the veterinary office and tell them that you feel your pet is having a medical emergency. It can be difficult for the veterinary staff to know if your situation is an emergency if you are unclear on basic information or if you don't specifically say that you think it is an emergency. Be as comprehensible and to the point as possible.
- **HUMAN INFLUENZA** – Ferrets are highly at risk of getting the “flu” or human influenza from their owners. They do not get a cold from their owners; these are a different set of viruses. Not only can they get the flu from you, you can get the flu from your ferret through contact with respiratory secretions. Common clinical signs of the flu in ferrets are watery discharge from the eyes and nose, sneezing, coughing, fluctuating fever and occasionally diarrhea. They usually are down for a few days but recover without incident. The veterinarian may prescribe medications or herbals to help your pet through the immune response to the virus. Antibiotics are not appropriate for this disease as it is viral and not bacterial.
- **FOREIGN BODIES IN THE STOMACH OR INTESTINES** – Ferrets love to chew and eat foam and rubber items which can become lodged in the intestines or the neck of the stomach. Ferrets can also develop a large mass of hair in the stomach, which can also cause an obstruction. All of these situations are dangerous and usually requires surgery to remove the obstruction. Clinical signs of a foreign body obstruction includes loss of appetite, lack of stools, lethargy, extreme dehydration, vomiting, painful abdomen, seizures and death.
- **EPIZOOTIC CATARRHAL ENTERITIS (ECE)** – This is the name given to “Green Slime Disease”. The disease is caused by a corona virus and is spread by bringing a new animal into the home or shelter. Once the other ferrets come into contact with this ferret and his stool they become infected. The exposed ferrets will start to exhibit clinical signs within 48 to 72 hours. Clinical signs of ECE are soft, green, mucous-coated stool with a very strong sulfur odor. Young ferrets usually recover from ECE rapidly, but older ferrets may lose significant body condition/weight loss and continue wasting away once the diarrhea is gone. Treatment depends on the severity of the illness and can include intestinal coating agents for the intestinal inflammation, antacids, antidiarrheal drugs, antibiotics, injectable fluids, supplemental feedings.
- **ADRENAL DISEASE** – This is one of the most common diseases of ferrets over two years of age. It is either a neoplasia (cancer) or hyperplasia (over activity) of the adrenal glands. These glands are part of the endocrine system (hormone producing system) of the body. These glands in ferrets for some reason become diseased and increase in size to the point where they put pressure on the kidneys or the vena cava. They also can produce an excessive amount of androgens or sex hormones in the ferret. This overproduction of androgens results in many different clinical signs such as hair loss on the tail creeping up along their hindquarters, enlargement of the vulva in spayed females, neutered males mounting spayed females, neutered males being aggressive to other males, enlargement of the prostate gland in males which can reflect as the ferret straining to urinate, an increase in body odor, dry-brittle hair coat, and itchier than usual skin. Treatment for

adrenal disease can be surgery to remove a portion or all of the adrenal gland, hormone injections, herbal and homeopathic treatments. For more information please read our Adrenal Disease hand out.

- **INSULINOMA** – This is also one of the most common diseases in ferrets over two years of age. This is a neoplasm of the beta cells of the pancreas; the pancreas is part of the endocrine system (hormone producing system) and the beta cells produce insulin, which acts to move glucose from the bloodstream into the cells. Insulin is a hormone which allows cells in the body to use glucose that is in the blood stream. Overproduction of insulin forces the glucose in the blood into the cells, which causes a drop in glucose level, or hypoglycemia. The clinical signs of this disease are overall weakness, lethargy, excessive salivation, tremors, seizures, staring off with a dazed look, hard to awaken, pawing at mouth, and hind leg weakness. The treatment for this disease is usually surgery to remove as much of the cancer as possible combined with life long medication and/or herbal medications. It is *essential* to remove as much carbohydrates from the diet as possible since this only further aggravates the disease. For further information please read our Insulinoma handout.
- **HEART DISEASE** – Ferrets of *any* age can develop heart disease. The most common type seen is cardiomyopathy (heart muscle disease). This disease appears to be more of a genetic trait that is passed from generation to generation. The signs of the disease are weakness especially after playing and an overall loss of energy. Ferrets usually don't cough, but may have more rapid breathing. The disease treatments can be herbal treatments, homeopathic treatments, and heart medications but the treatment will be based on what the veterinarian finds upon further diagnostics.
- **SKIN TUMORS** - As your ferret ages they become more prone to developing lumps and bumps on their skin. Most of these lumps are tumors called Mast cell tumors or sebaceous adenomas. Fortunately they are usually benign, but it is best to have them removed nonetheless. The longer you wait to have them removed, the greater the possibility for complications.
- **LYMPHOSARCOMA** – This is a cancer of the lymphatic system in ferrets. Unfortunately this cancer can affect ferrets of any age and has a wide range of clinical signs. The most common symptoms are enlarged the lymph nodes, lethargy in young ferrets, pale mucous membranes (gums, lips, and eye lids), weight loss, weakness, coughing, and difficulty breathing. Detection is usually done by running blood work or performing a lymph node biopsy on your ferret. Treatment of this disease varies from case to case but could include herbal supplements, conventional medications, homeopathic treatment, and glandular support.
- **PARASITES** – Ferrets, like dogs and cats, are susceptible to heartworm infection. There have been a few confirmed cases of heartworm in ferrets but not many. If you keep your ferret in an outdoor enclosure or if you have an abnormal amount of mosquitoes in your home then they should have their blood checked annually to make sure they are not positive with this parasite. Also, a heartworm preventative medication can be given to prevent this infection. Ferrets are also susceptible to fleas. Even if your ferret is an indoor ferret, fleas can come in on yourself and your other pets that *do* go outside. If you find fleas on your ferret then contact your veterinarian for the correct items to be used to eliminate this problem from your ferret and their environment. Gastrointestinal (GI) parasites are not very common in ferrets. There are no reports of natural hookworm or roundworm infections in ferrets. Ferrets rarely are infected with nematodes from other natural hosts. Protozoan parasites are most commonly seen in ferrets. Performing fecal flotation and direct fecal smears is how to diagnose GI parasites. Coccidia is commonly seen in younger ferrets that have chronic diarrhea or blood in their stool. Sometimes the ferrets start to prolapse due to the constant diarrhea from coccidian. Giardia is another protozoan that can be found in ferrets with diarrhea and vomiting.