



# Internal *and* external parasite infections

**J**ust like dogs and cats, ferrets can get parasites. These creepy crawly bugs can drive your ferret crazy—and you too. The best way to deal with these despicable freeloaders is to wage an offensive war and prevent parasites from ever bothering your pet.

Ferrets of any kind are susceptible to parasites, but young ferrets and those who live outdoors or with cats and dogs are at higher risk. Here's a rundown of some common ferret parasites:

## **INTESTINAL PARASITES**

Dogs and cats occasionally transmit these bugs to ferrets, and young ferrets are especially susceptible. The usual symptom is mild to severe diarrhea, but many parasite-ridden ferrets don't show any signs at all. Your veterinarian can detect intestinal parasites with a fecal examination.

Common intestinal parasites in ferrets are Giardia, Cryptosporidium, and coccidia. Your ferret can spread coccidia to dogs and cats and pass Giardia and Cryptosporidium to you and your family. Both Cryptosporidium and Giardia can be especially harmful to people with weak immune systems, such as newborns or the elderly, people with HIV, or anyone undergoing cancer treatments.

To diagnose intestinal parasites, your veterinarian

will perform a fecal test during your pet's first exam, on a yearly basis at the minimum, and anytime he develops diarrhea. If the doctor finds these parasites, he or she will prescribe an appropriate oral medication. Be sure to test and treat other family pets.

## **HEARTWORMS**

Mosquitoes transmit these blood parasites when they bite your pet. The worm matures in the major blood vessels of the lungs and in the heart, leading to lung congestion and heart failure. Ferrets with heartworms may cough, experience difficulty breathing, act lethargic, or even die suddenly. Outdoor ferrets are at most risk for heartworm infection, but any ferret who lives in an area with mosquitoes faces this danger. Your veterinarian can detect most heartworm infections with a blood test. Chest radiographs, or a heart ultrasound may also be required.

Heartworm prevention in ferrets is much easier and safer than treatment. Your veterinarian may recommend a once-a-month heartworm preventive for dogs and cats. Ask your pet's doctor about proper dosing. Treatment for a heartworm infection involves a series of injections and can be risky, but early diagnosis increases the likelihood of successful treatment.



### EAR MITES

Your pet can pick up ear mites from other ferrets or from dogs and cats. An infected ferret often exhibits dark-brown ear wax and may shake his head or scratch his ears—or he may not show any signs of discomfort at all. Ear mites are tiny, but your veterinarian can diagnosis them by examining your ferret's ear canal with an otoscope or looking at a sample of ear wax under a microscope.

Your veterinarian may treat your ferret's ear mites with ivermectin, which comes in injectable, oral, or topical forms. He or she also may prescribe other topical ear lotions for your ferret. The mite's life cycle lasts about three weeks, so treatment can take up to a month.

### FLEAS

Ferrets who live outside or with other pets often develop flea infestations. Most infested ferrets will scratch, sometimes until they lose hair or create a sore. Because fleas drink blood when they bite, a heavy flea infestation can cause anemia in ferrets and other small animals—

look for pale gums or lethargy in your pet. Seek immediate care if you notice this problem.



Check other pets and your ferret for fleas regularly. These pesky parasites often hide out between your ferret's shoulder blades. Also look for pepper-like specks that turn reddish-brown when wet—these are flea feces, a sure sign of infestation.

If your ferret has fleas, you'll need to treat him, other family pets, and the environment. Most flea products for cats are safe for ferrets, but ask your veterinarian before using any of these treatments.

### OTHER PARASITES

Sarcoptic mange (scabies) is caused by a skin mite that also affects cats and dogs. This condition often causes severe itching and sometimes hair loss, or it may affect only the feet. The most reliable common treatment for sarcoptic mange is ivermectin. Severe cases may require antibiotics for secondary bacterial infections or topical treatment to remove crusts. Although sarcoptic mange is not common in ferrets, it can be contagious to humans, so consult your veterinarian if your ferret shows signs of this condition.

If you find a tick on your ferret, use tweezers to grasp the tick as close to the skin as possible and pull gently. Don't crush the tick, because contact with the blood can spread disease—you may even want to wear gloves when removing it. Place the tick in a container of rubbing alcohol or flea and tick spray, and dispose of it.

With parasites, prevention is the key. So talk to your veterinarian about the most effective steps to keep those pests at bay.