

IFERRET Environmental enrichment

Ferrets are playful and energetic animals when they are awake. They normally enjoy each other's company and will happily play as a small group.

A ferret with no means to play or occupy its time will likely become distressed and encounter other behavioural issues. This can lead to biting, illness and general lack of well-being for the animal.

Two statutory items which should be included in any ferret enclosure are tunnels (tubes) and a hammock.

Tunnels can be made out of a] commercially available suppliers who make animal toys, b] waste / drainage pipe which is commonly available from building merchants or c] being creative with what you have available. Whilst the tubes / tunnels need to be of a size that your ferret can pass through without issue, it is also advisable to ensure there are small holes throughout the length of the tube to allow ventilation.

A homemade alternative to commercial toys is achievable by using an old pair of trousers / jeans. First remove the buttons and zips and then cut out or sew up the pockets (this prevents your ferret from storing things in them or becoming trapped), then place some strong wire in the hem at the bottom of each trouser leg to form a rigid circle. You can also insert a shorter piece of drainage tube into the bottom of each leg and this will give the ferrets something to run through or hide in when playing – don't be too surprised if you find one or two (or more) asleep in there at times.

Alternates to tunnels can be an old Wellington boot with the toe cut off but if you do decide to get creative then please try to eliminate any material which your ferret might chew or swallow. Ingesting foreign bodies can be a common issue with ferrets and will cause health problems.

The use of a hammock is now almost considered mandatory and is not exclusive to indoor or outdoor enclosures. Ferrets sleep for approximately 16-20 hrs per day depending on the time of year. In the summertime it may be too warm to sleep in its normal sleeping area / box therefore an open suspended piece of material is a welcome place to relax where there is free moving air. Hammocks are normally occupied by more than one ferret so putting multiple hammocks in the enclosure is advisable however sometimes you will likely find all your ferrets (if you have more than one) all in one hammock. It may appear crowded but this appears to be preferred by the ferrets and you will find them entwined amongst one another.

Commercial hammocks are available and come in all shapes and sizes. Some have double layers on them to form a pocket and these are greatly appreciated by most ferrets as it gives them somewhere dark to sleep. Alternatively an old cushion cover either zip fastened or sewn shut which is suspended at each corner (using paracord or a bootlace) is an excellent solution.

If space allows then you can add further ferret orientated objects to keep them active. Boxes again offer somewhere to hide and play as well as somewhere to sleep. Tubes into boxes creates a maze and multiple routes for your ferrets to come and go. Water is also sometimes used to enrich a ferret's enclosure. Ensure that it is not deep so that it is a risk or danger to the ferret but on occasion you may see a ferret pawing into water or dipping its head below the surface although not all ferrets like water. Ferrets have been known to retrieve small pebbles from water trays or put their heads under running water from the likes of a watering can. Caution is advised when introducing water into an enclosure as you always need to ensure the ferret can escape should it fall into any container that holds water.

Commercial toys which are designed for other animals may be appropriate however ensure they are not stuffed with material that the ferret may eat or made from a substance that rots or breaks down easily which the ferret may ingest.

Whilst some ferrets are inquisitive regarding noises, others are equally upset by loud and unwelcome noise. Toys which emit a noise should be introduced gradually and under close supervision.

If introduced or raised together then the best enrichment a ferret can have is another ferret. They will actively play together and sleep together. Sometimes ferret play can appear to very rough and tumble however this 'play fighting' is expected and as long as there is not any sign of physical injury or continued 'screaming' from either ferret then this is part and parcel of their daily activity. Where they might appear to be pinning each other down at one moment, the next they are likely to be eating from the same bowl or sleeping in the same hammock. Ferrets do have quite thick skin especially around the scruff of the neck and they do sometimes bite that area. If you are concerned then intervene to separate the ferrets and offer a treat to each ferret (a small piece of cooked chicken – always recommended to have a small amount available in the fridge) to calm them down. It can diffuse most over-energetic play-time.