

Gastrointestinal Foreign Bodies in Ferrets

(swallowed objects, hairballs, furballs)

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Overview

Gastrointestinal foreign body is a term that refers to any material other than food, that is eaten by the ferret and results in serious digestive problems. Foreign bodies can get lodged in the gastrointestinal creating an obstruction in the stomach or intestines. This results in loss of appetite, vomiting, diarrhea, and abdominal pain. Foreign bodies often require surgery.

Foreign bodies or objects eaten by the ferret are often made of rubber and can include pieces chewed from a sneaker, or pencil eraser, rubber or vinyl "squeak" toy, or the foam backing to carpeting or upholstered furniture. Some ferrets develop large hairballs (or furballs) in the stomach from grooming and these can also act as barriers to digestion. Any household object chewed on by the ferret can become a foreign body problem.

All ferrets are susceptible to developing foreign body problems but this is most commonly seen in young ferrets less than 2 years of age. These youngsters are naturally curious and like to dig and chew and burrow and are more likely to chew on the wrong thing. Hairballs can also form at any age, but because it takes some time for the fur to accumulate in the stomach, this is more likely to be a problem in ferrets over 3 years of age.

Although some smaller foreign bodies can pass through the gut without getting stuck, the larger pieces can result in serious gastrointestinal complications. Watch for sudden loss of appetite, vomiting, abnormal bowel movements (wrong color, consistency, or amount), and teeth-grinding, a sign of pain or nausea in the ferret.

Veterinary Care

Diagnostic tests

Abdominal radiographs (xray's) are the most important test. Sometimes the addition of a dye material like barium is recommended to further delineate the contents of the gastrointestinal tract.

Blood tests are often recommended to assess the general health of the sick ferret and as part of a pre-surgery work-up. This usually includes a complete blood count (CBC) and a plasma chemistry profile.

Treatment

Sick ferrets must first be stabilized by administration of fluids, electrolytes, and supportive care prior to a surgical procedure.

The majority of foreign bodies have to be removed through a surgical incision. This requires general anesthesia and usually 2-3 days of hospitalization.

Smaller, non-obstructing foreign bodies can sometimes be passed through using intestinal lubricants given by mouth.

Home Care

Ferrets that have undergone surgical treatment are usually sent home 2-3 days after the surgery. Cage rest is necessary until the incision heals, about 5-7 days. This means no bathing, no exercise, and no climbing up in multilevel cages or pet hammocks.

In multi-ferret households, surgical patients need to be caged separately from the others until the incision is healed, about 5-7 days. This is to decrease "rough-housing" and prevent licking at the surgery site by the other ferrets.

Owners must examine the surgical incision daily and report any excessive redness or licking at the site. Most ferrets leave the incision alone.

Skin sutures (stitches) are usually removed in 10-14 days. Some surgeons place absorbable sutures under the skin which are not visible and do not have to be removed.

Most ferrets are eating and acting normally within a week.

Preventative Care

All homes must be "ferret-proofed". Remove all objects that might become chew-toys for the ferret: inappropriate toys, shoes, wires, and household items.

Monitor the ferret's bowel movements periodically, and then daily if the ferret is suspected of eating something foreign. Pieces of objects can sometimes be identified within the stool.

Use a hairball laxative preparation 2-3 times weekly and daily during peak shedding periods or if your ferret has itchy skin. The cat preparations work well for ferrets. Use 1/4 of the recommended cat dose.

Any vomiting seen in the ferret is significant, even if it only happens once or twice. Call your veterinarian to discuss the situation.