Care of Ferrets

**Introduction:**
Ferrets are domesticated mammals from the *Mustela* family. Ferrets are sexually dimorphic, with the males being much larger than the females. Domestication of ferrets began approximately 2500 years ago, when ferrets were used to hunt rabbits. Today, ferrets are mostly kept as pets, though some are still used to hunt. Lifespan is currently around 5-7 years.

**Diet:**
In the wild, ferrets are strict carnivores and eat whole prey. While the ideal diet for pet ferrets is under debate, it is clear ferrets should not be fed foods containing grains or sugars. Commercial foods should contain as much meat and as little grain (cornmeal, soy, wheat) as possible, so it's important to read the labels. A few owners are feeding ferrets whole killed prey, such as mice and rats. However, most ferret owners prefer not to feed their ferrets this way.

**Captivity Requirements:**
The minimum cage size should be 36”x24”x24” for a single ferret, though we recommend getting the largest size cage you can accommodate. Ferrets are social and should be kept in pairs or groups if possible. Cages should have a solid bottom, as wire flooring can cause foot problems, and should be lined with fleece, towels or blankets. Ferrets are typically easy to litter train, as well, so you should provide a high sided litter box in a corner of the enclosure. Recycled paper litter is recommended for litter boxes. Ferrets also prefer comfortable bedding such as hammocks, tunnels or sacks to sleep in. Food should be provided in a heavy ceramic bowl to prevent tipping and water can be provided by either a bowl or a water bottle.

**Veterinary Care:**
Yearly checkups are very important in the pet ferret due to the unfortunate but relatively high incidence of illness in this species. We recommend checkups once a year for younger ferrets, and twice yearly for ferrets over 3 years.

There are two important and approved vaccines for pet ferrets. These protect against canine distemper and rabies virus. Canine distemper is a highly contagious and nearly 100% fatal disease in ferrets. Rabies virus is dangerous to both ferrets and humans. The state of Indiana requires rabies vaccination for ferrets. Any ferret that is not vaccinated for rabies that bites a human, even when playing, can be ordered to be euthanized for rabies testing by the Board of Health. For this reason, rabies vaccination protects your ferret both from the virus itself, and from the consequences should he or she accidentally bite someone.

Vaccine reactions are common in ferrets, and range from nausea to more severe shock-like symptoms. For this reason, when ferrets are vaccinated, we require they stay with us in the clinic for 30 minutes after each vaccine, which are given separately (same day or a separate visit). If there is a reaction, we can take steps to minimize it. There is some evidence that ferrets receiving the full series of distemper vaccine are actually protected for much longer than one year. For this reason, skipping yearly distemper vaccine may be an option for ferrets that have had a previous reaction to that vaccine. Skipping rabies vaccine, however, is not a good idea. For ferrets that have reacted to rabies vaccine, please discuss options with your veterinarian.