

# Why Should You Consider a Natural Ferret Diet?

By *Giuliana Stucco*, Guest Author

Nowadays, most people choose to feed their ferrets a commercial ferret kibble. The composition of ferret kibble has come a long way since its introduction. The unique dietary needs of ferrets are now much better understood, and pet food companies are striving to produce foods that meet those needs. But despite this progress, kibble may not be the best way to feed your ferret. So, what's the real problem with kibble, and what other options are out there? We're about to find out...

## What's the Problem?

The ferret is an obligate carnivore (an animal that must eat meat to survive). Its body is designed to eat a diet that is high in animal protein, fat and moisture, and very low in carbohydrates and fiber. If you look at the chart (page 22), you'll find that several of the kibbles listed come close to the fat, protein, fiber and ash content of a mouse (a natural ferret food). So you may be wondering: What's the problem?

## Problems With Protein

Even if the protein percentages in kibble match up to those found in a mouse, it doesn't mean this protein is completely digestible. Ferrets only benefit from quality animal protein. The percentage of protein listed for kibble does not show how much of that protein comes from plant sources. Even if the kibble lists its protein at 55%, it's possible that 25% of it is derived from plant sources, which means your ferret is only getting 30% usable protein. It is not required to put the percentage of usable protein on the kibble bag—just the total protein. Thus the actual amount of usable protein is uncertain.

## Carb Overload

In addition, the carbohydrate content is, at best, 1.5 times and at worst 6 times what a ferret would normally consume! A ferret's body is not designed to handle that kind of a carbohydrate load. The only carbohydrates a ferret would consume if fed a natural diet would be the nominal amount from the stomach contents and muscle glucose of its prey.

## Drier Than a Hardwood Floor

Kibble is also very low in moisture. The ferret is designed to eat a high-moisture diet, yet kibble has less moisture than a hardwood floor. The natural diet of a ferret is soft and squishy, not hard and abrasive.

These four things: non-animal protein, hard texture, low moisture content, and high carbohydrate content all diverge from the ideal percentages found in the ferret's natural diet. While not proven, it is theorized that ferret diseases such as insulinoma and oral problems could be related to these problem components of kibble.

## So, What to Feed?

So, if you don't use commercial ferret kibble, what are you supposed to feed your ferret? The answer is a natural ferret diet. Such a diet comes in two forms. The first is a whole prey diet, which consists of a variety of frozen-thawed (or live) feeder animals, such as mice, rats, and quail. The second is a raw diet based on the whole-prey model. This diet replicates the percentages of nutrients derived from whole prey in the form of raw meat, bone, and organ from butchered animal products such as chicken wings and chicken liver.

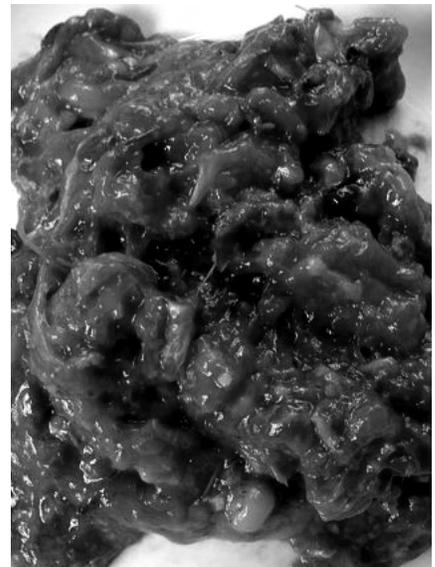
## The Wrong Fuel

When designing a diet for ferrets, we should keep their dietary needs in mind. If we put the wrong "fuel" into them, they won't function at their best, much as a car that runs on unleaded fuel would not function at its peak if we filled it up with diesel. When we fill our ferrets with processed diets that are higher in carbohydrates and plant protein, and far lower in moisture, than what they would naturally consume, we are putting the wrong "fuel" into them. This can cause or contribute to serious problems.

## Insulinoma

One common ferret disease is insulinoma (tumors on the pancreas). These tumors cause excess insulin to be produced by the ferret's body, which breaks down glucose levels and can cause hypoglycemia, or fatally low blood sugar.

Although the exact cause of insulinoma is unknown, many veterinarians link it to a diet high in carbohydrates. Most ferret owners try to



limit their ferret's carbohydrate intake by not offering it sugary treats, but they often overlook the high-carbohydrate content in the commercial food they feed their ferret every day. Many ferret foods are a lot higher in carbohydrates than the foods a ferret is naturally designed to eat. It seems possible that such a heavy load of carbohydrates might well stress the ferret's system and cause or contribute to insulinoma.

To try to reduce the risk of this disease (or to manage the symptoms), you should offer your ferret a diet that is very low in carbohydrates. The best diet would be a natural diet. By limiting the amount of carbohydrates that go into our ferrets, we can hopefully reduce the risk of insulinoma. A low-carbohydrate diet does not guarantee the prevention of this disease, but it is still a smart idea.

### Oral Issues

Oral issues are (unfortunately) quite common in ferrets. The most common oral problems are plaque/tartar, tooth erosion, and gingivitis/periodontal disease. It is commonly thought that kibble can help to keep teeth clean. This is untrue. Not only does kibble not help to keep plaque and tartar at bay, it might actually contribute to it! In addition, kibble may play a role in the development of gingivitis and periodontal disease. It is also very abrasive and can cause tooth erosion, wearing down the teeth to flattened stubs.

When a ferret eats kibble, it "slices" the kibble with its teeth, which breaks it into small crumbs. The simple sugars from the kibble crumbs then sit in the mouth of the ferret, along the gum line, where they can cause plaque and tartar buildup, as well as gingivitis and periodontal disease.

When food and bacteria are allowed to fester below the gum line, the gums become inflamed. The beginning stages are generally a mild inflammation of the gum line, called gingivitis, but if left untreated, the inflammation can blossom into full-blown periodontal disease. Periodontal disease is very serious. It has been linked with tooth loss, as well as with heart, liver, and kidney disease!

When a ferret eats a natural diet, it slices through fur, flesh, and bone. The food is cut into manageable bits and the chunks are swallowed whole, meaning that no sugary food crumbs are left sitting along the gum-line. The shearing through meat, bone, and fur also wipes the



PHOTO BY GIULIANA STUCCO

teeth gently, in contrast to the scraping action of kibble.

No matter how often you brush the teeth of your kibble-fed ferret, the oral cavity is bombarded constantly with sugars from the kibble. Ferrets eat several small meals a day, so even if you were to brush their teeth every night, residue would still be on their teeth all day. Brushing teeth is simply not a replacement for a natural diet, which is extremely low in simple carbohydrates and cleans the ferret's teeth each time it eats.

### Conclusion

Why do people bother with a natural diet? Because the composition of even the "best" commercial ferret kibble fails to meet all of the "fuel" requirements of the ferret and can therefore lead to various health issues.

The purpose of this article is not to make you feel bad for feeding your ferret dry food, but rather to bring to your attention the importance of making a better, healthier, food choice for your ferret.

In the words of Maya Angelou: "You did what you knew how to do, and when you knew better, you did better."

### Resources

To get started learning the ins and outs of natural ferret feeding, check out the following resources:

*The Holistic Ferret Forum:* <http://holisticferret.proboards80.com>

*NaturalFerrets Forum:* [www.naturalferrets.com](http://www.naturalferrets.com)

**ADDISON'S** *from page 10*

protocols. Percorten has the advantage of being an injectable, time release drug, while Florinef must be given every day and a single missed dose can prove fatal. The drawback to Percorten is that the interval between shots is variable for each ferret, and most ferrets have decreasing response to the drug, requiring it more often over time.

Currently, I give a single injection of Percorten at the time of surgery, if I suspect suppression of remaining tissue or removal of all adrenal tissue. The owner is instructed to give prednisolone if signs of Addison's disease develop. Since the initial duration of Percorten activity is between 21 and 28 days, electrolytes are checked at day 21, 25, and 30. If the ferret is clinically normal and bloodwork is normal, I recommend recheck at day 60. If not, treatment (Percorten or Florinef) is continued and regular bloodwork instituted.

I currently share my life with two Addisonian ferrets, both maintained on daily Florinef and prednisolone in their chicken gravy. Both of these ferrets became Addisonian after complete adrenalectomy, and both are doing very well. One of them is approaching three years post-surgery.

I recommend that owners of Addisonian ferret keep injectable saline fluids on hand and be comfortable with giving subcutaneous fluids in the event of clinical signs developing, and that they develop a close relationship with their veterinarian.

It is very possible to maintain these ferrets and give them normal, happy lives. The key is for both owner and veterinarian to be aware of the possibility of Addison's disease and to be aggressive about starting treatment. If this is done, a ferret with Addison's disease may never know that there is a problem.

**Comparison of Percent Composition of Adult Domestic Mouse vs. Commercial Ferret Kibble (on a dry matter (DM) basis)**

Food	Protein <sup>1</sup>	Fat <sup>1</sup>	Fiber <sup>1</sup>	Ash <sup>2</sup>	Carbs <sup>2</sup>	Moisture <sup>2</sup>
Adult domestic mouse	56.9%	23.5%	4.3% <sup>3</sup>	11.3%	4.0% <sup>3</sup>	67.4%
Natural Gold	55.6%	24.4%	5.6%	7.2%	7.2%	10.0%
Innova EVO	55.6%	23.3%	1.7%	9.4%	10.0%	10.0%
Mazuri	43.2%	23.3%	4.5%	8.5%	20.5%	12.0%
8-in-1 Ultimate (crunchy)	50.0%	17.8%	3.3%	7.8% <sup>3</sup>	21.1% <sup>3</sup>	10.0%
Zupreem	44.4%	22.2%	2.2%	7.8% <sup>3</sup>	23.4% <sup>3</sup>	10.0%
Totally Ferret (Adult)	40.0%	24.4%	1.7%	7.8% <sup>3</sup>	26.1% <sup>3</sup>	10.0%
Marshall Ferret Food	42.2%	20.0%	3.9%	7.2%	26.7%	10.0%

<sup>1</sup> not more than  
<sup>2</sup> not less than  
<sup>3</sup> information not listed; educated estimate

**FERRET BIBLE**

Researchers have recently uncovered a Bible written in the ferret language. They have managed to translate a small portion of the book of Genesis...

On the first day of creation, God created the ferret.

On the second day, God created hoomans to serve the ferret.

On the third day, God created all the animals of the earth to serve as potential play toys for the ferret.

On the fourth day, God created honest toil so that hoomans could labor to provide for the ferret.

On the fifth day, God created balls and tubes and plastic bags and stuffed animals and various other things so that the ferret might

play with them for a few minutes before going back to destroying the belongings of their hoomans.

On the sixth day, God created veterinary science to keep the ferret healthy and the hooman broke.

On the seventh day, God tried to rest...but He had to clean the litterbox and all the corners.

— Author Unknown

