

RECENT OUTBREAKS OF DISTEMPER A CONCERN FOR FERRET OWNERS

By the Education Committee

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The recent outbreak of Canine Distemper Virus (CDV) at the Marshall Farms breeding facility in New York exposed 250,000 ferret kits to the virus, according to People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (<https://www.peta.org/blog/marshall-farms-ferret-distemper-outbreak/>). Some of these kits were actually shipped to stores around the nation. Many kits infected with the virus died, raising concern and fear among ferret owners. For a short period, Marshall Farms halted their breeding program. They consulted with Michigan State University about the origins of the virus. Treatment for some of the youngest kits, if begun very early, was effective. Thus, the protocol for vaccinating Marshall Farm's kits was revised.

Whereas previously Marshall's kits received a single CDV vaccine at 3-4 weeks of age, now the kits are vaccinated twice by the age of 8-9 weeks. This results in kits that are 12+ weeks old arriving in retail stores for sale. Although there are unconfirmed reports that these older kits have also suffered from CDV, this could not be verified. The problem is that many ferret owners who visit retail pet stores to purchase food and supplies are drawn to the display selling ferrets because.... They are so darn cute! As ferret owners, we feel the need to share our knowledge and experiences with pet store employees or prospective buyers. And, of course, we handle the kits and then go home to our own ferrets! "Transmission of the virus is primarily through aerosol droplet secretions from an infected animal, which can live in grass, weeds, trees, and shrubs for up to 10 days," according to College of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences, Texas A&M University (<https://vetmed.tamu.edu/news/pet-talk/ferret-distemper/>)

As a ferret owner, what are your options to keep your ferret safe? You should either vaccinate or titer and then the titer results will indicate if additional vaccination is needed. Most ferret owners routinely vaccinate their ferrets annually to prevent CDV. Others have their veterinarian draw blood to run a titer to test for immunity. The ferret distemper titer will determine whether your ferret remains immune to the CDV or if repeat vaccination is

necessary.

The decision to titer is made by ferret owners for several reasons. Unnecessary vaccinations can over-stimulate the ferret immune system resulting in an increased risk for anaphylaxis as well as an increased risk for the development of autoimmune diseases (e.g. hemolytic anemia). Also, many ferrets have been known to have adverse reactions to Benadryl, a common, yet undesirable choice used for premedication prior to the distemper vaccination.

Ferret owners who have kept up with annual examinations and vaccines / titrating know that a blood sample is drawn by your veterinarian and sent to a specialty lab for evaluation. The ferret distemper titer can be performed one year following the completion of the initial distemper kit series and yearly thereafter. Ferret owners who perform titers have found that their ferret(s) can remain immune to distemper for 5-6 years without the need for re-vaccination. A titer value of ≥ 64 indicates immunity. It has been observed that some titers will stay the same for many years, some will go down and some may actually go up. Although it is recommended to repeat a ferret distemper titer yearly, some may choose to skip a year if the most recent titer is > 1000 .

