



Exotic Animal Hospital of Philadelphia

Ferrets and the flu

What is the 'flu'?

Influenza, or "flu", is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses that infect the nose, throat, and sometimes the lungs. Flu viruses that commonly spread among people (human seasonal flu) can also affect ferrets. Other (non-human) flu viruses are found in different animal species, such as chickens and pigs, but these flu viruses are not known to circulate among ferrets.

How it spreads?

Flu spreads through droplets when coughing, sneezing, or talking. You can also get the flu by touching a surface or object with the flu virus on it and then touching your mouth, nose, or possibly eyes. People can spread the flu to ferrets through coughing, sneezing, talking, or through direct contact (touching). Animals and people infected with flu viruses may be able to spread flu to others before they develop symptoms. There are no reports of flu spreading from ferrets to people, but because ferrets can get sick with human flu viruses, it may be possible for them to spread flu viruses to people.

Who is at risk?

Anyone can get sick with flu, but children younger than 5 years old, pregnant women, people 65 years of age and older, and people with certain chronic conditions or weakened immune systems are at high risk of developing serious flu complications. Getting a seasonal flu vaccine every year can help prevent flu and reduce the risk of serious flu complications.

Symptoms in people:

People with flu can have fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle or body aches, headache, or tiredness (fatigue). Because flu can spread from people to ferrets, people who may be sick with flu should not be around ferrets. If contact with your pet while you are sick is unavoidable, use a face mask and gloves to prevent the spread of flu. Also, wash your hands before and after interacting with your ferret.

What does the flu look like in ferrets?

As in humans, symptoms of flu in ferrets usually begin with a fever. As the fever subsides, signs of upper respiratory illness ensue. Coughing, sneezing, thick nasal discharge, and watery eyes can all be seen. Affected ferrets often become lethargic and refuse to eat. Gastrointestinal signs, such as vomiting or diarrhea, may also be observed. Most healthy adult ferrets recover within 7 to 14 days with proper care. Nutritional support and fluids, either oral or injectable, will

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info@eahphilly.vet
Lafeber Vet
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be needed in most cases. Sometimes, your veterinarian may also prescribe cough suppressants, decongestants, and/or antibiotics. Very young or very old ferrets are most likely to develop life-threatening complications, such as pneumonia.

What should I do if my ferret develops signs of respiratory illness?

Quickly contact your exotic animal veterinarian when you suspect a respiratory illness in your ferret. Other diseases, such as heart disease and deadly canine distemper virus, can appear similar to influenza. Early treatment for many conditions can mean the difference between a quick recovery and devastating illness.

