

Dear Dr. Wise:

Question: We need some information. After I retired, we moved to a no-pets-allowed condo and had to give away our dog. Our children felt sorry for us and gave us a little female ferret. We know nothing about taking care of a ferret. Can you help us?

Answer: Ferrets are delightful pets. They have become popular as more people discover how playful and affectionate they are and how easily busy owners can care for them. They are less demanding and require less care than cats and dogs.

You will find that caring for a ferret is very much like dealing with a dog or cat. They seem to have an instinctive attraction to the texture of litter and can be trained to use a litter box. You can teach them to come when you call their name, whistle or cluck your tongue.

If you have a female, however, you have a major new complication. Ferrets are induced ovulators, unlike dogs. This means that when a female comes in heat, usually in the spring, she will stay in heat.

During estrus (heat), ferrets maintain a high level of estrogen that leads to depression of bone marrow. When this happens, the animal can develop anemia and a low level of blood-clotting agents called platelets. As a result, the body may lose its bloodclotting ability and the animal can hemorrhage and die.

To head off trouble, spay the ferret when she is 6-8 months old. Males should be neutered about the same age to help prevent their spraying and calm down their aggressive behavior. You may also want to remove the scent glands during neutering or spaying.

Some people think that ferrets are mean and aggressive. They are, after all, wild animals. But your pet will be gentle and responsive if you give it a lot of attention and gentle treatment from an early age.

As you see, while you may have a new kind of animal for a pet, you care for it as you would a dog or cat. Most important, you can have the same enjoyment from the little animals as you have from traditional pets.

If you have a question, write Dr. Wise, Indiana Veterinary Medical Association, 201 S. Capitol Avenue, Suite 405, Indianapolis, IN, 46225, or www.invma.org.