

# **CANINE DISTEMPER IN FERRETS**

This handout reviewed by Dr. Mark Burgess of Southwest Animal Hospital in Beaverton, Oregon (503) 643-2137.

## **Transmission**

Canine (dog) distemper is an airborne virus that can be transmitted from direct or indirect contact with an infected animal. It can be transmitted from your clothing, shoes, or from your skin for at least 8 hours after exposure. In other words, your ferret can become infected just by inhaling the virus from your skin or clothing! Since the incubation period can be as long as 10 days, always isolate any new dogs or ferrets brought into your household for 14 days unless immunity to canine distemper (and other contagious illnesses) can be ascertained. Use caution and common sense when handling other dogs or ferrets.

## **Symptoms**

Canine distemper is virtually 100% fatal in ferrets within 12 to 42 days after exposure. Once they get the disease, euthanasia is usually recommended to prevent the spread of disease to other animals and to put the animal out of misery. The signs of distemper are the loss of appetite, foul-smelling yellow or green sticky eye discharge, swollen eyelids, green or yellow nasal discharge, swelling of the lips and chin, thick brown crusts that form on the eyes, nose, lips and chin, lethargy, diarrhea, a subtle form of pneumonia, dehydration, swelling of the anus, orange crusting of the skin in the abdominal and anal area, muscular tremors, hyper-excitability, convulsions, and in the later stages thickening and hardening of the paw pads. Many of these symptoms are never seen because the ferret will die first. Ferrets do not appear to be susceptible to panleukopenia (feline distemper).

## **Immunity and Vaccinations**

Kits receive immunity from their mother provided she was properly vaccinated. Older studies indicated that this maternal immunity lasted from 5 to 16 weeks. Newer studies suggest that at 6 ½ weeks of age, only 1/32 of the original maternal immunity is left. The actual length of protection is dependent upon the antibody level of the jill when the kits were born and the amount of colostrum (first milk) that each kit receives. To establish and maintain immunity, kits need a series of three shots at 6, 10, and 14 weeks followed by a yearly booster. Adults only need a yearly booster unless you are unable to establish that the ferret has had previous vaccinations. Two shots given three to four weeks apart are recommended for adult ferrets that have not previously established and maintained immunity.

Currently, the only canine distemper (CD) vaccine tested and labeled for ferrets is a modified-live vaccine called FERVAC-D. Another vaccine that has been used for many years on ferrets (but not labeled for ferrets) is Galaxy-D. However, FERVAC has a much

higher probability of a severe reaction than Galaxy-D. Never use any of the following vaccines: a combination distemper shot such as the DHLPP which is given to dogs, killed CD vaccine, feline distemper vaccine, or any CD vaccine cultivated from ferret tissue. If you use FERVAC-D in conjunction with Imrab (for rabies), Rhone-Merieux suggests waiting two weeks (or longer) between the immunizations to reduce the chance of reactions. Rhone-Merieux states that this delay is not necessary when Imrab is used with Galaxy-D

Be sure to stay at your vet for at least 30 minutes after any vaccination and watch for signs of anaphylaxis (sneezing, vomiting, hives, itching, swelling, bloody diarrhea, cessation of breathing, or collapse). Immediate veterinary care is necessary to save the life of a ferret that experiences anaphylactic shock including administering epinephrine, steroids, fluids, and Benadryl. If your ferret has a reaction, ask your veterinarian about pre-medicating with Benadryl and cortisone prior to the next booster. If you have any further questions about canine distemper or need to have a booster vaccination, please contact a veterinarian who specializes in ferrets.

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