



Female ferrets, or jills, are induced ovulators, (i.e. they require the act of mating to stimulate them to release an egg for fertilization). This means that they will stay in season (or oestrus) until they are mated, or until day length shortens.<sup>1</sup> Remaining in season can cause often severe health problems for a jill; including alopecia (hair loss) and even death from oestrogen-associated anaemia (deficiency in red blood cells).<sup>2</sup>

Methods to manage a jill's reproductive biology to prevent such health issues may be either surgical (neutering), chemical (contraception) or a combination of both. Some owners may use vasectomised hobs to bring their jills out of season through the act of mating. All options also prevent unwanted pregnancy and can help reduce aggressive behaviour and the typical musky smell associated with the maturing male (or hob). There are benefits and risks to each method and this document aims to provide information for ferret owners to use in discussion with their vet, to decide which method is best for their pet.

### SURGICAL NEUTERING - CASTRATION AND SPAYING

- Spaying is the term for the surgical removal of the ovaries and uterus. Castration involves the surgical removal of the testes; a castrated male is known as a hobble.
- Castrating hobs can reduce aggressive behaviour and increase play<sup>3</sup>, both in surgically neutered animals and those receiving contraceptive treatment (see below).
- Castration is generally also a cheaper option than chemical contraceptive methods.
- However, surgical neutering in ferrets of both sexes has been linked with the occurrence of hyperadrenocorticism (adrenal disease), and adrenal tumours.<sup>4</sup>
- Research suggests that this is caused by excessive production of sex hormones following neutering.<sup>5</sup>
- Signs of hyperadrenocorticism in ferrets include some that are similar to prolonged oestrus in jills (e.g. alopecia, swelling of the genital area); urinary blockage and cyst formation in hobs, and pruritus (itchiness) in both sexes.<sup>2</sup>
- If castration or spaying is performed, it is generally advised that it should not be done until after puberty to delay the possible onset of adrenal disease.<sup>1</sup>



### CHEMICAL CONTRACEPTION METHODS- IMPLANTS OR VACCINATIONS

- Chemical- based contraception methods are available to manage a ferret's reproductive biology.
- This may involve either placing a chemical implant under the ferret's skin whilst he/she is sedated, at regular times throughout the ferret's life; or by giving annual hormonal injections to jills.<sup>6</sup>
- 'Deslorelin' implants can be used in both sexes and work to reduce the release of sex hormones from the brain and remove the trigger for sex hormone production in the adrenal glands.
- The implant's slow-release action means that they are generally long-lasting, depending on the strength of the implant used (as different doses are available) and the time it is implanted, but can last up to 18-24 months before another implant is given.<sup>8</sup>
- How frequently implants are given again depends on the amount of hormone in the implant and the cost to the individual owner.<sup>8</sup>
- Research suggests that these implants are effective in preventing adrenal tumours in ferrets and offer a promising alternative to surgery.<sup>7</sup>
- If a ferret is surgically neutered and is showing no signs of adrenal disease, then it is possible to still use implants as a preventative measure against it.
- Giving hormonal injections (or 'jill jabs') of proligestone on a yearly basis is also effective in keeping a jill out of season by suppressing the production of hormones that trigger oestrus.<sup>1</sup>
- Jill jabs are usually given at the beginning of the breeding season in early spring.

### VASECTOMY

- A vasectomy is the process of sterilising a hob by cutting the tubes that carry sperm from the testicles to the penis. A vasectomised male is known as a hoblet.
- The process of vasectomy does not affect the hob's capability to mate. Mating jills with a vasectomized hob, or 'teaser', to bring them out of season has been common practice in Great Britain for many years, largely due to its ease and low-cost.
- However, although mating is a natural behaviour, the act itself is often violent and very stressful for the jill. Repeated matings may result in damage to the jill's neck and so this practice is not recommended.<sup>1</sup>



## Neutering and contraception methods for ferrets

RSPCA COMPANION ANIMALS PET CARE FACTSHEET



### RECOMMENDATIONS

The RSPCA recommends that the reproductive biology of ferrets is managed by owners to prevent associated health and behaviour problems and reduce the amount of unwanted ferrets through accidental pregnancy. This could be by either surgically neutering or by using a chemical contraceptive method. A combination of both may also be used. It is advised that ferret owners speak to their vet to assess the right option for their individual ferret, discussing possible side-effects and cost. Knowing the benefits and risks involved in all methods will help you make an informed decision as to which is best for your pet.



#### OTHER POSSIBLE LINKS:

- Ferret welfare needs [webpage](#)
- Neutering [webpage](#)
- Find a vet [webpage](#)

*Links to the web pages of other organisations are provided for additional information only and do not imply any endorsement by the RSPCA of those organisations or of any content on the website.*



### REFERENCES

1. Chitty, J. (2009). Ferrets: biology and husbandry. In: E. Keeble, A. Meredith (Eds). *BSAVA manual of rodents and ferrets*. BSAVA U.K.: 193-204.
2. Rosenthal, K.L., Peterson, M.E., Quesenberry, K.E., Hillyer, E.V., Beeber, N.L., Moroff, S.D. and Lothrop Jr., C.D. (1993). Hyperadrenocorticism associated with adrenocortical tumour or nodular hyperplasia of the adrenal gland in ferrets: 50 cases (1987-1991). *J. Am. Vet. Med. Assoc.* 203: 271-275
3. Vinke, C.M., van Deijk, R., Houx, B.B. and Schoemaker, N.J. (2008). The effects of surgical and chemical castration on intermale aggressions, sexual behaviour and play behaviour in the male ferret (*Mustela putorius furo*) *Appl. Anim. Behav. Sci.*, 115: 104-121.
4. Schoemaker, N.J., Schuurmans, M., Moorman, H. and Lumeij, J.T. (2000). Correlation between age at neutering and age at onset of hyperadrenocorticism in ferrets. *J. Am. Vet. Assoc.* 216: 195-197
5. Schoemaker, N.J., Teerds, K.J., Mol, J.A., Thijssen, J.H. and Rijnberk, A. (2002). The role of luteinising hormone in the pathogenesis of hyperadrenocorticism in neutered ferrets. *Mol. Cell. Endocrinol.* 197: 117-125.
6. Vinke, C.M. and Schoemaker, N.J. (2012). The welfare of ferrets (*Mustela putorius furo*): A review on the housing and management of pet ferrets *Appl. Anim. Behav. Sci.* 139: 155-168.
7. [Schoemaker NJ, van Deijk R, Muijlaert B, Kik MJ, Kuijten AM, de Jong FH, Trigg TE, Kruitwagen CL, Mol JA.](#) (2008). Use of a gonadotropin releasing hormone agonist implant as an alternative for surgical castration in male ferrets (*Mustela putorius furo*). [Theriogenology](#). 70: 161-167
8. Chitty, J. 2012. Ferret Medicine- The Basics, Webinar accessed 12.9.12

*This pet care sheet has been produced by the RSPCA Companion Animals Department (V2 CAD/AC 10.10.12). This leaflet is provided for general information only and is not intended to be relied upon as specific advice. Whilst we try to ensure that the information is correct, we cannot accept any responsibility for the accuracy of the information, nor for any reliance on or use of the leaflet.*