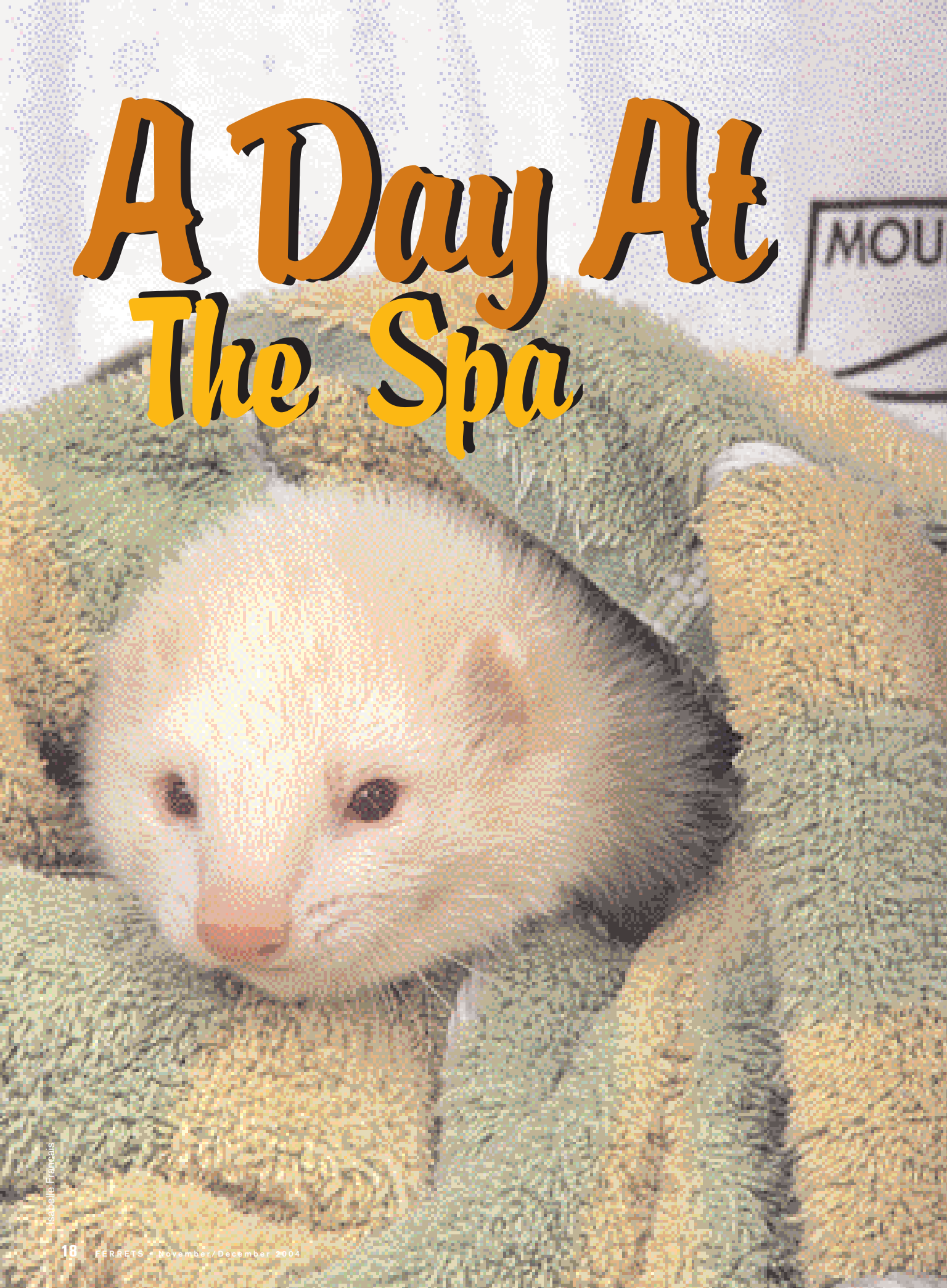


# A Day At The Spa



# Zodiac's Product Roundup:

Hi! My name is Zodiac. I am a sable-mitt ferret that lives with my mom, dad and a ton of other ferrets. I am the hardest working ferret in the household and stay busy putting things in their proper places where the humans can't find them. As you can see by my celebrity photo, I am also an exceptionally beautiful ferret that needs plenty of grooming treatment to stay ready for the camera. Regular treatments at the grooming spa are a necessity for any ferret, however, not just the celebrities. Although I don't much care for my spa treatments, I know that grooming is a needed sacrifice to please my fans!



John Porter

## Zodiac reviews grooming products in a ferrety version of a spa day.

By Erika Matulich, Ph.D., and Zodiac The Ferret

**H**il! This is Erika, Zodiac's mom. Zodiac and the other ferrets in my household are on a "spa schedule" of regular grooming. Every two weeks, Zodiac has her nails trimmed, ears cleaned and teeth brushed. Once a month, the spa treatment includes a careful brushing (to check for parasites or skin problems), heartworm and hairball medications, and possibly flea and tick treatment. Every three months is the "super spa" day – all of the above, plus a bath! I'll review each of these grooming procedures, with Zodiac's help, of course.

### Manicure & Pedicure

*Ohboyoboyoboy! It's treat time. I just love my magic ferret oil, and Mom is letting me have the entire bottle. At the same time I am getting a manicure, but who cares with all this ferret oil to lick up? I get this spa treatment every other week, and I really enjoy it. Sometimes the toenail trimming gets in the way of my holding the bottle of oil. I don't pay for my manicure, though, so I guess I can put up with a few problems.*

I clip my ferret's nails every other week. When I keep up with nail trimming, my ferrets seem to dig less at the carpet and furniture. And I don't want to feel those needlelike nails during bath time! Besides comfort for you and your household, ferret toenails should be trimmed regularly for ferret safety. Long nails can catch in bedding, and a snagged ferret won't be able to reach food and water and may yank until the nail pulls out or a toe breaks. Extremely long nails such as those sometimes found in neglect cases actually curl under the toes, crippling the ferret's gait or injuring pads and causing infection.

#### Manicure Materials

When it's time to trim, you'll need toenail trimmers, your

ferret's favorite oily or gooey treat for distraction, a towel, a damp cloth for cleanup, styptic powder and a bright light. And of course, you'll need your ferret, too! Line up your equipment before you fetch your fuzzy.

Scissor-style clippers with a nail notch are popular with ferret owners, and they are probably your safest bet. There are several brands marketed specifically for ferrets, but the same scissors are available under bird and cat labels. Debra Thomason, a ferret owner in Texas, said, "Some folks use human nail clippers, but these human trimmers make it difficult to see the vein in the nail and to avoid nicking nearby toes with the curved edge of the clipper."

Guillotine-style trimmers are another option. With these, the claw is inserted in a metal loop and the plier action of the blade cuts the nail. These are really designed for dogs, and it takes some level of expertise to handle the tiny toes of ferrets. Whichever type of clippers you use, make sure the cutting edges are sharp, because dull blades will crush or splinter the nails.

For the distraction treat, most ferrets enjoy an oil-based supplement. A number of these supplements are available through various pet supply retailers. They not only please your ferret, but also provide essential fatty acids needed for healthy coats. Some ferrets prefer the malt flavor of hairball preventives or even the soft, sticky inside of a prune. Try a few treats to find the one your ferret likes best.

#### Ready, Set, Snip!

Gather your supplies at a table near a comfortable chair. Make sure you have good lighting. Sit down and spread the towel across your lap to support the ferret between your legs and place the ferret on its back. Immediately apply the treat to the ferret's lower belly and direct its nose to it. Your ferret should lick at the treat until it's gone, and sometimes

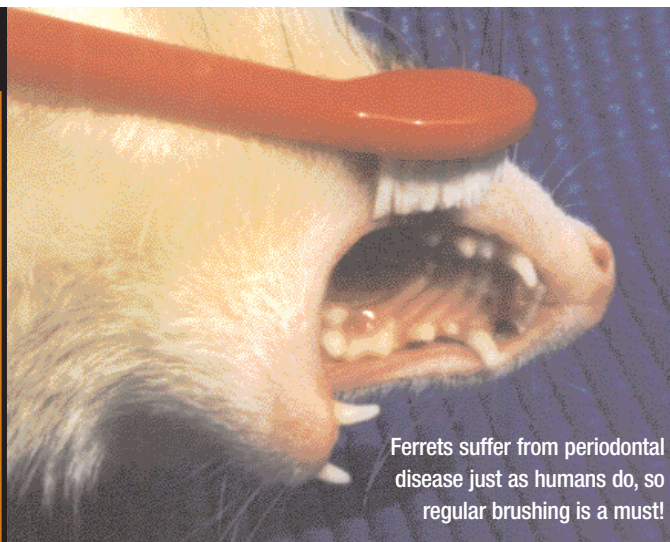
## Odor-Fighting Dos & Don'ts

### TO REDUCE ODORS, DO

- Spay/neuter your ferret
- Feed a high-quality, nutritious diet
- Keep ears and teeth clean
- Clean litter boxes daily
- Launder ferret bedding weekly
- Clean cages regularly

### TO REDUCE ODORS, DON'T

- Overbathe your ferret (every other month or less is fine)
- Use perfumes, colognes or other heavily-scented products
- Apply human scent products, deodorizers or powders directly to a ferret



Ferrets suffer from periodontal disease just as humans do, so regular brushing is a must!

John Porter

until the scent is gone, too. I use a cleaner method – I put the entire bottle of supplement on Zodiac's belly between all of her paws with the drop dispenser at her mouth. She happily balances the bottle and licks at the dispenser the whole time I perform the manicure.

While your ferret is busy licking, grasp a foot, selecting one toe at a time for trimming. Use the pink vein in the nail as a guide. Clip no closer than a sixteenth of an inch to this vein. If you have good eyesight, you will see a white sheath around the pink vein that extends slightly to the point of the nail – clip just beyond the point of this white sheath. Be prepared for tugging or struggling, because your ferret feels a pressure sensation as you trim and even pain if you clip too close to the vein. Hold the foot firmly to prevent pulling or jerking while you are clipping. If a particular nail becomes an issue, switch feet and come back to it later –and be sure there's plenty of the treat to keep your ferret occupied!

If all else fails, make a ferret burrito by rolling your ferret up in the towel. Keep its head and a single paw sticking out. Hold the bundled ferret tightly to prevent it from wiggling out, and have a partner offer the ferret a treat from a dropper or spoon while you trim.

### Accidents

The biggest risk in trimming a ferret's nails is cutting too short and causing the vein inside a nail to bleed. A struggling ferret may also get a toe accidentally nicked in the process. As with all small animals, you must stop the bleeding as quickly as possible. Applying styptic powder to the bleeding nail helps clot the blood and stop the bleeding. If you forgot the styptic powder, emergency alternatives include frequent applications of cornstarch or flour. Keep an eye on this tender nail for several hours to be sure it clots up, and get to a veterinarian if bleeding continues or is excessive.

*Wow! I am sure glad Mom has never made me bleed! She says it's because she has piles of practice, averaging more than 3,000 nails a year during the past 18 years. She complains because now she needs special glasses to see our toenails. I'm just glad she is careful and I get lots of treats. I*

**“Ferrets should have their teeth brushed regularly – veterinarians recommend every other week.”**

*feel sorry for Gus, who has to be a ferret burrito each time he gets his manicure.*

### Dental Duties

*I hate this part of spa day (and so do the other ferrets)! I have lovely, sparkly white teeth that I keep in perfect fitness by chomping on any other ferret that steals my toys, so I sure don't need help with mouth maintenance. But I am still subjected to this silly tooth-brushing and mouth-wiping regimen after the manicure. It doesn't make sense to me! At least the stuff in my mouth tastes OK, but it's not as good as the magic ferret oil!*

A twice-monthly regimen of oral care can save on vet visits and result in a longer and healthier life for your ferret. Ferrets have 34 adult teeth. If plaque is not removed, it can collect and calcify on the teeth to form tartar. Like other pets, ferrets should have their teeth brushed regularly – veterinarians recommend every other week. Although a diet of dry kibbled food can help clean teeth, softer food, treats and sugary snacks will build up plaque, just like on human teeth. My own ferrets enjoy “healthy” treats such as raisins, dates and grapes, but the natural fruit sugars also harm teeth. My ferrets are also treated to turkey baby food, and this can cause buildup as well, so in between I use dental swabs (a liquid-filled cotton swab product made for ferret teeth cleaning). If your furry friends eat fruit treats or softer foods, you may want to increase your brushing regimen to once



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a week or use dental swabs in between your regular brushing.

### **What If You Skip The Brushing?**

If plaque continues to build up on the teeth, gums will become red and swollen (the same as with human periodontal disease). This allows bacteria to enter your ferret's system, and these bacteria can cause tooth root abscesses, susceptibility to infections, lethargy from low-grade infections, kidney and liver problems, and even heart disease! The plaque will eventually harden into tartar and continue to build layers, making the gums very painful, and the teeth less able to chew. When tartar builds up (usually seen as a brown discoloration on the side molars), it's time to see the vet!

A veterinarian can anesthetize your ferret and perform a professional dental scaling. If you don't regularly brush your ferret's teeth, you may need to visit the vet yearly for this procedure. As your ferret gets older, the risk involved in using anesthesia increases, and dental scalings may not be an option. Avoid the need for this procedure with a ferret toothbrush!

### **Ferret Toothbrushes**

Never use a human toothbrush on a ferret! Even the softest baby toothbrush is too hard for ferret teeth and gums. Several cat toothbrushes on the market work quite well. I use a kitten toothbrush that looks like a tiny standard bristle brush with an angled head. Another popular style is a finger toothbrush, which is a soft, latex-type material that fits over your index finger thimble-style. The bristles are made of the same soft material. I think the finger toothbrush is gentler and gives you more control, but I had to quit using mine because Zodiac likes to chew rubbery things and kept biting the brush! I was afraid she would get a blockage if she swallowed some brush parts by mistake.

### **Ferret Toothpastes**

Never use a human toothpaste on a ferret! Human toothpastes are too abrasive for ferrets and can cause tooth damage. Additionally, if



## Grooming Gear

### Trimming Nails

- Nail trimmers/clippers
- Styptic powder
- Liquid or sticky treats
- Bright light

### Oral Care

- Pet toothbrush
- Pet dentifrice paste or tooth gel
- Pre-treated oral swabs or tooth-wipe pads

### Cleaning Ears

- Cotton swabs

- Ear cleaning solution or liquid miticide

- Treats
- Towel

### Bathing

- Ferret shampoo
- Ferret conditioner (optional)
- Absorbent drying towel or sack

### Between-Bath Grooming

- Super-soft pet brush
- Deodorizing wipes

your ferret swallows any toothpaste, it can get very sick. Use a special pet toothpaste (sometimes called an “animal dentifrice”) or pet dental gel. Pastes for cats work well, and my ferrets prefer the malt flavoring. These toothpastes and gels are edible, so there is no need for rinsing and no fear if your ferret swallows any.

### How Do You Brush A Ferret's Teeth?

Start by wetting the bristles of the toothbrush and applying a tiny amount of paste or gel (a blob about the size of a drop of water). You may need to scruff your ferret or have an assistant hold your ferret's head. Then gently massage the gums and the canine teeth and work back toward the molars. Work on the outside surfaces more to help reduce the tartar buildup in these areas that the tongue doesn't reach. Most of my ferrets didn't mind the procedure once they got used to it, which took about six times. Zodiac, on the other hand, continues to squirm and spit every time. She does a bit better with the oral swabs, and some ferrets don't mind teeth-cleaning pads.

### Earwax Eradication

*These spa employees just don't get it. First my teeth are assaulted, and now they want to stick things in my ears! I need to complain to the customer service department, because I really don't want my ears cleaned as part of the spa treatment. No amount of magic ferret oil will fix the indignity of ear cleaning! I don't see why the other ferrets cleaning my ears isn't good enough.*

Ferrets produce lots of earwax, which can affect their hearing. That's why it's important for you to regularly inspect and clean their ears. Every other week is a good regimen, though this does depend on the ferret – some ferrets natu-

rally produce more wax, and others less. Also, the same ferret can produce varying amounts of earwax at different times of the year (they produce more during the summer and during seasonal changes).

The earwax is usually brown, orange or reddish. If you don't clean out earwax regularly, a strong odor results, and your ferret can experience temporary hearing loss and discomfort from pressure and infections. Worse yet, earwax is an excellent breeding ground for ear mites.

Most ferrets hate having their ears cleaned, so the first few cleanings may be challenging. Some ferrets get used to it and simply sigh and accept their fate. Others, such as Zodiac, will struggle forever. If your ferret is like Zodiac, you may need another person's help to keep your pet still. With practice, however, you should be able to scruff the ferret with one hand and clean an ear with the other. It might help to distract your ferret with treats.

Distract your ferret with a special treat while trimming its nails.



John Porter

### Ear Equipment

Use an ear-cleaning solution or a miticide that is labeled safe for use in ferrets, kittens or rabbits (preparations labeled safe for adult cats or dogs or for puppies may be too harsh). Don't use any preparations intended to dry out the ear, and don't use rubbing alcohol, which can destroy ear tissue. Mineral oil, a common home remedy for other pets, will only add to the oily buildup in the ferret's ear, so Zodiac and I don't recommend it. Hydrogen peroxide can be used occasionally but it tends to dry out the ear.

In a moment of emergency, you can dampen a cotton swab with plain tap water. I also recommend cleaning your ferret's ears during or after its bath to make sure you remove any soap residue. Pretreated ear swabs filled with an ear-cleaning liquid that helps prevent ear mites are also available at various pet supply retailers.

Use soft, moistened cotton swabs or pretreated liquid swabs to clean your ferret's ears. Don't use a dry swab; it will irritate the sensitive skin inside the ear. Wet the cotton swab with the ear-cleaning solution and gently wipe it through the



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crevices of the outer ear. Ferret ears have lots of folds and pockets in their outer ear, and it may take several swabs to remove all the debris collected in these crevices. Only clean the part of the ear you can see! Don't push the cotton swab into the ear canal, even if you see earwax in the canal.

*I sure don't want to get ear mites. Chester once had ear mites, and the vet said it was a ferret "social disease," so all of us had to be treated. No fair! But I watched Chester go crazy shaking his head and dragging his ears on the floor, so I am glad I have very clean ears with no bugs tromping around in them.*

### **Bath Time!**

*Uh oh, this seems to be the "complete package" for spa day, because Mom is getting out the ferret towels, and I hear water running in the ferret sink. I'll just have to be a bathing beauty – it's all part of being a celebrity!*

Some ferrets enjoy a bath, but most dislike them – although they have a great time drying off! The bath water should be warm, but not scalding hot. A ferret's body temperature is higher than ours (100 to 104 degrees Fahrenheit), so lukewarm water may actually cool your ferret. Ferrets seem to feel more comfortable if they don't have to swim during the bath and have something on which to rest their feet.

My ferrets enjoy a combination bath/shower. I pre-heat the kitchen sink with hot water (cold metal or porcelain can quickly make a bath uncomfortable). Then I fill up the sink with a few inches of warm water. The ferret is placed in the water, and I use a gentle stream from either the faucet or the sink sprayer to rinse the ferret.

Be careful not to get soapy water in your ferret's ears, eyes, nose or mouth. Make sure you rinse thoroughly because soap residue left on the ferret can make it very itchy! In



Ferrets might dislike ear cleanings, but clean ears help prevent infection or ear mite infestation.

fact, too much water (and soap) can overdry a ferret's skin and cause odors worse than no bathing at all. For this reason, I only bathe my ferrets every three to four months. In dry months, I also use a rinse-out ferret fur conditioner.

#### What You Need

Get all your materials together before bath time, because you will need to move quickly during the procedure. First, a ferret shampoo is needed. Avoid human shampoos, as they are not pH-balanced for ferret fur. There are also some ferret rinse-out conditioners available. If your ferret has a parasite problem, use a flea shampoo labeled safe for ferrets or kittens.

After the bath, the goal is to remove as much water as possible from the ferret. There are special super-absorbent ferret/pet drying towels. An item I find particularly useful is a drying sack. Because ferrets like to race around after a bath, dragging body parts all over the floor in an attempt to dry off, I find they may get even dirtier after the bath. Zodiac in particular would prefer to dry off in potting soil, and Gus would like drying off in coffee grounds in the trash. It's much easier to zip the ferret into a drying sack!

#### In Between Baths

Because you should only bathe your ferrets every few months, there are "in between" products that can help keep your ferret fresh. One such product is a deodorizing wipe. A good wipe is formulated to condition and protect fur and skin but not add any fragrance. Ferrets have very sensitive noses and lungs, so added fragrances that may smell good to you are



*"Only clean the part of the ear you can see."*

Whenever you bathe your ferret, be sure to rinse out the soap thoroughly so the skin remains healthy.



John Porter

irritating and potentially harmful to your ferret. Nell Adams, a ferret owner in Georgia, said, "I avoid all heavily scented products for ferrets; fragrance-free is best!"

Many pet (and human) colognes and perfumes are alcohol-based and can harm ferret skin and fur. There are also spray-on waterless sham-

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poos, which might be effective in cold weather.

Brushing your ferret's fur, especially during shedding season, can help prevent hairballs. At brushing time, I also administer hairball remedy. Use a pet hairbrush or slicker brush labeled as "super soft" to help prevent skin and fur problems.

In between baths, I use a brush to groom and inspect my ferrets for potential skin problems, or parasites such as fleas. In warm weather, fleas can be a real problem, so I treat with a monthly drop-on-the-neck flea treatment recommended by Zodiac's vet. You could also bathe with a flea shampoo, but I don't like to use flea shampoo on a regular basis because it can dry the skin.

*Super spa day is over. I am a sparkling clean, fabulous ferret ready for my next celebrity interview! Now I really need a nice, long nap. I hope my mom has given you all the right grooming instructions, and told you about all the grooming products you'll need. Good help is hard to find!* 🐾

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**Kodiak's Precious Zodiac Bear** is a sable-mitt sprite and daughter of Precious (dam) and DAF Kodiak Bear (sire). She was born at Bandit's Beggars and Thieves in Texas. Her hobbies include weasel work, being pampered, treat begging, resting, sock stealing, shut-eye and human training.