

Zodiac's Product
Roundup:

Litter Boxes & Litter

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Carolyn McKeone/Courtesy of Cindy George

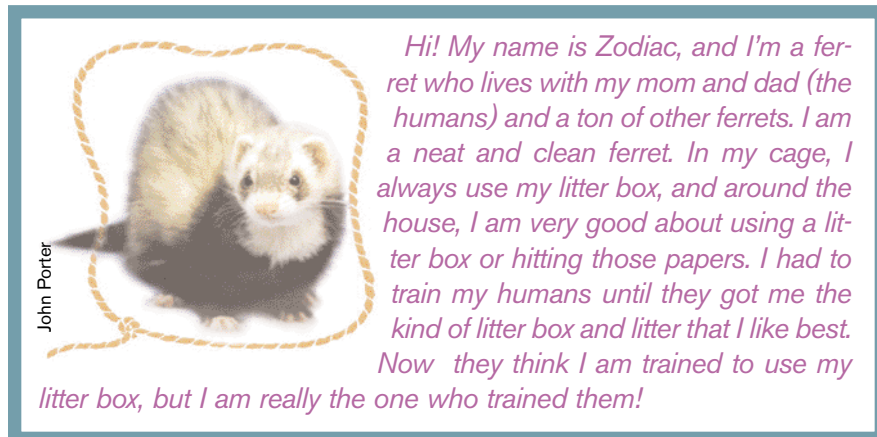
Zodiac provides a ferret's perspective on litter boxes and litter. By Erika Matulich, Ph.D., and Zodiac The Ferret

What Is A Litter Box For?

Hi! This is Zodiac's mom, and I'll be helping Zodiac out with some commentary about ferret waste management. The right kind of litter box and litter can make a big difference in how your ferret stays clean. In general, ferrets are pretty good about using a litter box in the cage; they are clean animals that don't want to soil their bedding. A ferret that has never had a litter box or is being introduced to a new cage and litter box situation may need some training.

Yahoo, a new toy for me! A fabulous box full of neat stuff for a ferret to dig in. First, a good snorkeling is in order to really understand the essence of this new play material. (Sneeze, sneeze, sneeze, sneeze.) That was great! Then some scratching to feel how this stuff rolls around under my paws. Then it's time to fling this stuff everywhere. What fun. Look at it fly! Wow, I am really tired now, so I will go to sleep this instant in the new box.

Unfortunately, a new ferret or a new litter box situation leads to the litter box being treated as a toy. Many ferrets love to play in a clean



Hi! My name is Zodiac, and I'm a ferret who lives with my mom and dad (the humans) and a ton of other ferrets. I am a neat and clean ferret. In my cage, I always use my litter box, and around the house, I am very good about using a litter box or hitting those papers. I had to train my humans until they got me the kind of litter box and litter that I like best. Now they think I am trained to use my litter box, but I am really the one who trained them!

litter box; they dig it out, sleep in it and then find somewhere else to do their business. You must demonstrate to the ferret that the point of a litter box is not play, and that better toys and sleep areas are available.

Ferrets love to dig, so try to give them other outlets for their digging instinct. Provide a "digging box" when they play outside the cage.

To create a digging box, obtain a large, see-through storage container with a lid. The container should be at least 12 inches tall if it has a lid and at least 24 inches tall if it lacks a lid. Fill the container with about 3 to 5 inches of digging material. Snap on the lid, cut a hole in the center of the lid, and attach a ferret tunnel or dryer hose. The lid (and optional tunnel) will keep the digging material from flying all over your floor.

The most popular digging material is rice. Use long-grained rice, and avoid instant or minute rice. Instant rice expands too quickly in a ferret's digestive tract and can cause intestinal blockages.

Long-grained rice passes through their system with little problem if the rice accidentally is ingested.

Keep an eye on your ferrets, and make sure

that they are not actively consuming the digging material. You will need quite a bit of rice – from 30 to 50 pounds – so buy the least expensive bags in bulk. Check the sidebar in this article for a list of other digging materials that ferrets love.

Digging boxes allow your ferrets to burn off their natural digging instinct and reduce their need to dig up a litter box. Remember to supervise all digging sessions.

Tips & Shortcuts

Oooh, lookie! I just got a new boxie thingie in my cage. It must be good to sleep in, so let me get rid of all the silly pellets in it and make a nice new bed. Hey! Don't interrupt my beauty rest by putting more of those silly pellets in there! This is where I want to sleep. Well, here we go again, more human training needed. A ferret's hard work is never done. (Sigh)

Ferrets naturally like to burrow and hide, so give them nice tunnels, sacks or boxes to sleep in so they won't use the litter box as a bed.

Zodiac's favorite litter box also was a favorite bed, so we bought her an identical litter box and turned it upside-down to form a "cave" where she prefers to sleep. We also added more hammocks and sleep sacks to her cage so she has plenty of alternative sleeping places. Her litter box now stays filled with litter and is used properly.



A ferret's litter box must be big enough to hold the ferret and have high sides and a low entry.

Another way for your ferret to get the hint about the proper use for a litter box (other than digging or as a bed) is to leave a "starter" poop in the box. Do this by placing your ferret's previous poop into the box. Your ferret will hesitate to play in a dirty box, and the smell will remind it of what belongs in a litter box. You can clean the box completely once your ferret is conditioned to use it.

Ferrets have some unique bathroom habits. One is to back up before going, which necessitates a high-backed litter box. If the sides of the container are too low, your ferret may back over the edge and deposit outside the litter box. Ferrets also instinctively use corners. For this reason, a variety of corner litter boxes are on the market. Corner boxes are great for ferret kits and early litter training.

"Most ferrets prefer having their entire body in the litter box when doing their duty," said Barbara Ludt, a ferret shelter operator from Florida. "Some

corner litter boxes may not be large enough to accommodate an adult or larger ferret." If your ferret hangs out of part of the litter box or if it gets frustrated, exits the box and goes next to it, change to a larger or rectangular litter box.

Some ferrets don't like to share litter boxes, so you may need to provide several in a crowded cage. Another ferret bathroom habit is to "wipe" after doing their duty; place a towel, newspaper or other easily changed or washable item in front of the litter box.

Likely And Less Likely Litters

My mom gives me super-duper litter that smells nice, doesn't hurt my nose or eyes, feels good under my feet and dries quickly. If I scratch around, it isn't dusty either. Once Mom ran out of my favorite litter and just put some paper towels in my box. Lck! I let her know right away that I needed my favorite litter. Pooping outside the litter box always gets some

sort of rapid result for a ferret.

A wide variety of litters exist, so be certain choose a ferret-friendly kind. Because ferrets like to dig and snorkel in their litter, as well as wipe their behinds after eliminating, provide ferret-safe litter that doesn't harm their lungs, eyes, nose or sensitive skin.

Recommended litters are usually compressed wood pellets or compressed newspaper pellets. Some people also use alfalfa pellets (rabbit food).

Wood pellets are excellent at controlling odor, absorbing moisture and being easy to discard (some are flushable; others can be tossed in the garden). The heat process used to form and extrude pet-quality wood pellets does a great deal to reduce the harmful chemicals in some woods like pine. Many wood pellet litters designed for cats are suitable for ferrets, as they are made of kiln-dried pine. The kiln-drying or "denaturing" process takes out the

Dig Box Materials

Good materials:

- Long-grain rice
- Sand
- Potting soil
- Peat moss
- Gravel
- Biodegradable cornstarch peanuts
- Shredded newspaper
- Crosscut shredded office paper (made by shredders that put out confetti-type paper, not strips)
- Popped or unpopped popcorn
- Dried beans or peas
- Ping-Pong™ balls
- Plastic Easter eggs
- Cardboard puzzle pieces

Bad materials:

- The litter you use in the litter box (confuses the ferret)
- Styrofoam packing peanuts (toxic fumes and ingredients)
- Instant rice (can cause intestinal blockages)
- Shredded office paper strips (can cause paper cuts)
- Corncob or clay litters (too dusty)
- Anything your ferret seems to enjoy eating (can cause intestinal blockages or nutrition problems)

Some ferrets don't like to share litter boxes, so you many need to provide several in a crowded cage.

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Provide a dig box for your ferret to play in so that your pet doesn't satisfy its digging instinct in the litter box.

harmful phenols that can hurt ferret lungs, but a nice, mild pine scent remains.

Zodiac's favorite wood pellets are made from Aspen wood, available at many pet supply outlets. Aspen wood has a minimum of natural chemicals.

A favorite substitute for pet-quality wood pellet litters for many ferret owners is wood-stove pellets. Wood-stove pellets are compressed sawdust and can be significantly less expensive. Be

very careful, however, when purchasing these. Be sure that the pellets are made of hardwoods only (to make sure there are no cedars or other softwoods with acids or phenols).

Also check the labels on the pellets; some are specifically labeled as "not for animal use" because they contain binders and chemicals specific to wood-stove burning and are not safe for ferrets. Wood-stove pellets are available in tractor supply, hardware

and fireplace retailers in the northern regions and may not be available in southern stores.

Another favorite is pellets or compounds made from recycled newspapers. These absorb lots of moisture, are biodegradable and can be flushed. The material doesn't stick to the litter box or the ferrets and does a good job of controlling odor.

Blanca Martinez, a ferret owner in New Mexico, loves the newspaper pellets. "Newspaper products are sterile, virtually dust-free, and unscented, with the ferret's lungs in mind," she said.

If you run out of your ferret's favorite litter, you can substitute regular, unscented clay cat litter, although this can be dusty. Shredded newspapers or paper towels can be used in a pinch but are not as odor-controlling and should be changed several times a day.

Ferrets have extremely sensitive

To keep your ferret using the litter box, clean the box of waste daily and change all the litter weekly.

lungs, so any scented litters or litters that give off odors should be avoided. Cedar and pine shavings may smell great, but the chemicals that come from cedar or non-kiln-dried pine are harmful to ferret lungs and irritating to their eyes.

“Although wood chips may provide a natural means of insect and odor control, ‘natural’ does not always mean safe,” said Jeff Johnston, an epidemiology researcher in North Carolina. “These same chemicals can also damage the respiratory tract, causing chronic respiratory disease and asthma.” Wood shavings or chips aren’t as absorbent as necessary either.

Avoid clay-based clumping litters. The granules in these litters expand when wet, and ferrets have gotten clumps in their nostrils (from snorkeling) and their anus (from wiping) that have caused blockages. The particles stick to the mucous membranes and then expand. I know of one ferret that had to have some serious surgery to have a large plug of clumping litter removed from a nasal passage. If you like the easy maintenance of clumps, one *wheat*-based clumping litter on the

market is labeled safe for ferrets.

The other litter to avoid for ferrets is silica-based (pearl, bead, flake or gel). The silica can be harmful if ingested and can cause damage to mucous membranes.

When I attended a pet product distributor convention last year, many of the manufacturers of silica-based beaded/pearl litters were demonstrating their wares to potential retail buyers. I had lots of fun seeing how absorbent the material was in the test

displays.

In one test, the representative had me dip my hands in water and then swish my hands around in a bucket of pearls. My hands were quickly dry! It was amazing stuff – until I accidentally touched my eye. The residue on my finger immediately absorbed all the moisture from my eye; I could not blink, because my eyelid was stuck to the top of my eye. The other untouched eye began tearing up immediately, but every bit of moisture in the affected

Litter Options

Good litters to use:

- Wood litter pellets (denatured)
- Wood-stove pellets (if from hardwoods only and no animal warnings)
- Newspaper pellets or fibers
- Wood pulp fibers (labeled safe for ferrets)
- Alfalfa pellets (rabbit food)
- Wheat-based clumping litter (labeled suitable for ferrets)

Acceptable litter substitutes:

- Regular, unscented clay cat litter
- Shredded newspaper
- Shredded paper towels

Unacceptable litters:

- Clumping clay litters
- Silica litters
- Any scented litters
- Cedar shavings
- Corncob litters (dusty, causes blockages if ingested)
- Wood chips (splinters and harmful phenols)
- Wood-stove pellets labeled “not for animal use”

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Crazy Things You've Done

Owning a ferret can put you in some pretty interesting situations. What out-of-the-ordinary things have you done because of your ferret ownership or interest in ferrets? We editors can list marching in a parade and making ferret-decorated eggs, but I'm sure that many of you have even better tales to tell. Choose one of your favorites, and tell us about the experience in 250 words or less. A prize of \$250 will be awarded on publication to the most amazing story, as judged by our editorial panel. Please include a photo of you with your ferret. (Sorry, no Polaroids or computer-printed photos can be considered.) Digital photos can be considered but must be high-resolution (300 dpi) and measure at least 3 by 4 inches. Send your entries to: Crazy Things, FERRETS, P.O. Box 6050, Mission Viejo, CA 92690; ferrets@fancypubs.com. Please include a phone number where we may contact you in case we have a question. **The deadline for entry is May 1, 2004.**

Employees or relatives of Bowtie Inc. are not eligible to enter.



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The left photo shows four types of recommended ferret litters (clockwise from top left) — compressed newspaper pellets, aspenwood pellets, wheat clumping litter and sanitized wood pulp bedding.

The right photo shows three of the litters that might harm a ferret's health (clockwise from top) — clumping clay cat litter, silica crystals and pearls, cedar shavings.

eye was sucked up.

It was an extremely uncomfortable experience for several long minutes. These types of litters are *not* good for ferrets, because ferrets often stick their faces into litter to play and wipe their rears after going to the bathroom.

One pearl-type ferret litter is made from bentonite, which is nontoxic, dust-free and suitable for ferrets. So look for the ingredients rather than the shape.

Keeping Clean

Because I no longer snorkel in my litter, my mom can layer it. On the bottom of the litter box, Mom puts the kitty clay litter, but to make sure that I don't get exposed to any dust, she puts my favorite wood pellets on top. Mom scoops my box every morning, and once a week, she dumps the whole thing in the flowerbeds and fills the box with fresh layers. Those other ferrets have to share their cage with

each other, so their litter box gets changed more often.

To keep your ferret using the litter box, clean the box of solid waste daily and change all the litter weekly. If you have more than one or two ferrets, do more frequent cleanings. If your ferret is new to using the litter box (or you just completely replaced the litter), remember to leave that "starter poop" in the box. If you don't clean often enough, the ferret may stop using the litter box because it is too dirty.

The last thing you want is for your ferret to select a new potty spot. If your ferret does have an accident in the "wrong" place, remove the offending material to the litter box and clean all traces with a mild 10 percent bleach solution to get rid of the odor that lures the ferret to go there again.

Training Tips

I know my mom and dad will let me out of my cage as soon as I use my lit-



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ter box. Sometimes I can fool them and pretend to go, and then I can come out faster! Dad is easier to fool than Mom.

Ferrets generally need to relieve themselves as soon as they wake up. The best way to train your ferret to use the litter box is to wake it up, put it in the litter box and prevent it from leaving until it has done its business. This may take some patience initially, because your ferret will be more interested in playing with you and forget that it has to go.

After a while, it will become habit for your ferret to use the litter box upon waking. Don't take your ferret out until this duty is done. Then you only have an hour or two before the next urge comes.

Don't ever punish your ferret for missing the litter box. Ferrets have such short attention spans that they don't link the punishment with the misplaced deposit. Physical punishment will result in an unhappy, confused and aggressive ferret.

Out & About

When you let your ferrets out to run around and play in your home, don't expect them to run all the way back to a cage to use the litter box. Ferrets instinctively go in the most convenient corner, so put extra litter boxes or newspapers in the corners of rooms that your ferrets explore.

The other place that ferrets go to "mark" their homes is usually at the exterior door that you walk through most often. Just like marking the entrance to their own burrows, ferrets seem to know where the entrance to your home is and happily potty right in front of the door. This is an instinctive behavior that should not be punished. Just put some newspaper down, and change it frequently.

Ferrets also seem to know where *you* go to the bathroom and often go behind your toilet. Again, extra litter boxes or newspaper is the answer. If you see your ferret checking out a corner, scoop up the ferret, rush it to the nearest litter box and hope that it gets the hint.

I hope that I have helped out you humans in selecting the best litter boxes, litter and training methods. My mom probably helped out a bit, too, but sometimes I know better about what is best for a ferret. I am the bestest ferret ever! 🐾

Erika Matulich is a professor at the University of Tampa in Florida and the former president of the Ferret Lovers' Club of Texas. She is a Certified Small Animal Specialist by the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council. She is a frequent contributor to *Ferrets*, *Ferrets USA* and *Critters USA* magazines and was the contributing ferret editor for *Pets.com*. Matulich is the proud owner of six ferrets.

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 pandemonium, weasel work and busybody business, accompanied by intense treat begging, sock stealing and human training.