

Sleep Accessories



Carolyn McKeone/Courtesy of Cindy George Faith Uridel

Zodiac's Product Roundup:

Hi! My name is Zodiac. I am a sable-mitt ferret who lives with my mom and dad and a ton of other ferrets. I am the hardest-working ferret in the household. I spend many laborious hours keeping all the drawers and cabinets open and putting things like socks in their proper place behind the waterbed where they can't be disturbed. After a hard session of weasel work, the most important thing in my life is to rest up for the next session of dashing about. As you can see by my photo, I am an exceptionally beautiful ferret who needs plenty of beauty rest. I deserve the best, so my mom and dad give me all the proper sleeping accessories that I require.



John Porter

Zodiac helps us review sleep sacks, hammocks and other accessories for ferret rest and relaxation.

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

Hil I'm Zodiac's human mom, and I'll ask Zodiac some questions and help Zodiac in providing insights into ferret sleep accessories. Ferrets love to sleep; they are experts at it! After the kit stage, ferrets may want to sleep 15 or even 18 hours a day. They'll wake up any time of the day or night to play with you, but ferrets need comfortable beds for sleeping. Basic ferret beds come in two types: sleep sacks or hammocks. We'll go over both of these as well as variations on them.

Snoozin' In Sleep Sacks

How did humans figure out that ferrets needed a bag to sleep in? It was a logical determination. According to Larry Fewell, a ferret owner from Texas, "Ferrets were originally burrowing animals, and a sleep sack provides a warm, dark, comfortable, protected place to hide. Sleep sacks with a single opening are also easier to defend."

In the days before sleep sacks, people gave their ferrets old T-shirts, towels or pantlegs, and the ferrets happily burrowed down in the cloth. Old clothes and towels are dangerous, however, because snags and frays catch toenails or tangle up ferrets. A

How Many?

Take the number of ferrets, multiply by 1.5, and round up to the nearest whole number. The result is the minimum number of sleeping areas your ferret needs (a combination both hammocks and sleep sacks).

For example, one ferret should have one sleep sack and one hammock ($1 \times 1.5 = 1.5 \rightarrow 2$). Two ferrets need three sleeping places to choose from, such as one sleep sack and two hammocks. Three ferrets could use two sleep sacks and three hammocks.

Remember, this is the minimum number of sleep areas, and your ferrets will appreciate additional choices!

sleep sack provides the advantages of safety and comfort, with strategically placed seams and a limited tendency to twist and tangle.

Q: Zodiac, what is your favorite sleep accessory and why?

A: I just love my sleeping bags! They are warm and dark, and I can easily pop my head out of one end and make sure that no other ferret tries to get in. This is my sleeping bag, and I don't want to share! Some of those other ferrets like to sleep together in big piles but not me. Those other ferrets can just share that bigger sleep sack that is not quite as soft as mine.

Sleep sacks are typically a fabric bag with one open end, often with a fleece lining. They come in various sizes, from fitting a single ferret to holding a pile of four or more. There are also unlined sleep sacks. My ferrets, including Zodiac, prefer the creature comforts of a snuggly, soft fleece liner.

Q: Is there anything you don't like about sleep sacks?

A: I hate sleep sacks that crackle! Who could get a wink of sleep?

A few sleep sacks have "crinkle" material liner that makes noise, but these are more of a play toy than a sleep sack. Gus, who is deaf, is the only one of my ferrets that sleeps in a crackle-sack.

Many variations exist in fabric, shape and design. One variation is a tube/tunnel (a longer sleep sack with two open ends). The first fleece tube I ever bought was 6 feet long, and I gleefully thought about how many ferrets it could hold. Zodiac took it over, however, and sleeps in the middle. She awakens only to rush to either end to chase out any interloper. Zodiac is very territorial about her beds!

Hanging Out In Hammocks

Hammocks are designed to be suspended from the cage, forming a dimple where a ferret can curl up. Ferrets love hammocks. My ferrets prefer them, especially in warmer weather.

The history of ferret hammocks is unclear,

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Loosely woven or worn-out fabric is a hazard for ferret's toenails.

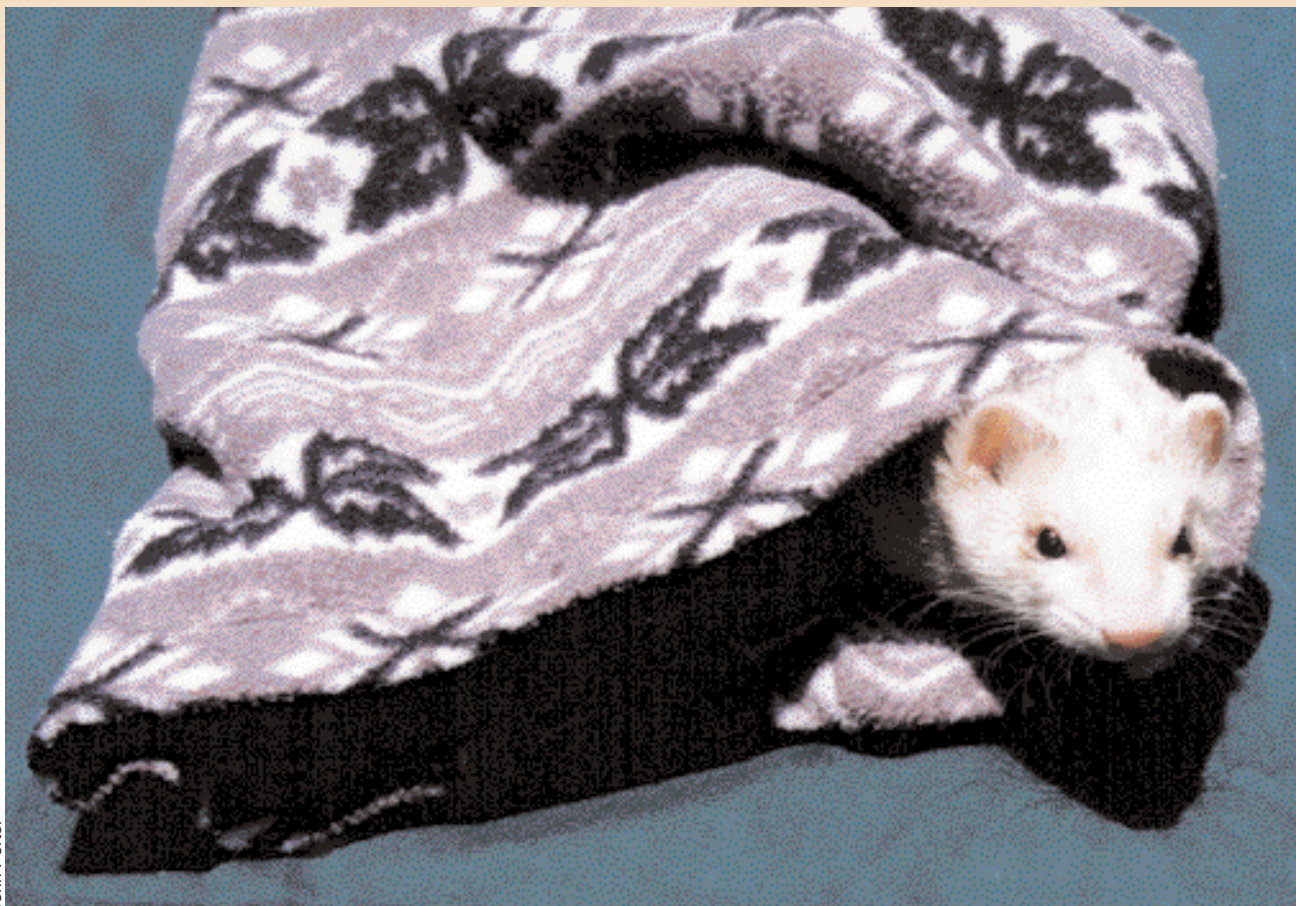
because no wild ferret cousin would dream of climbing up a tree and sleeping out in the open! Legend has it, however, that a female ferret owner of ample proportions suspended her old bras in her ferret cage and the ferrets slept in the cups. Apparently, improvements on this early design led to today's hammocks.

Q: Can you tell us anything more about your hammocks?

A: Tons of hammocks hang in my cage. I can choose where to sleep, no matter what the weather. On warmer days, I sleep in the top hammock of my cage. I stay comfy but keep cool. I also can use the hammocks to climb up and down in my cage.

When I was a little kit, sometimes I would misstep. If I fell out of a hammock, though, another





Sleep sacks provide a warm, dark place for ferrets to rest.

er was below to catch me.

Hammocks are great because they add more usable space to a cage. You create another level when you hang them. They also can be strategically hung to provide "steps" to a higher level and prevent long falls in a multi-story cage.

Like sleep sacks, hammocks come lined or unlined. Those with "pocket" designs allow the ferret to either sleep on the outside or tunnel into the interior of the hammock. These sleep sack/hammock combinations are quite versatile.

Picky Preferences

Q: What color of hammock do you like best?

A: Ferrets can only see the color red, so I really don't care about color. Any pattern is fine with me. I just want sleep things that are very, very comfortable. Softer is better!

In terms of decorating, choose ferret comfort over color. The variety of fabrics, patterns, materials and colors on the market give you lots of choices to fit your personal tastes. First, select the hammocks and sleep sacks that are safe and soft, and then see what colors you can get.

Q: Do you and other ferrets have any preferences for fabric types?

A: The fabric should be spill-proof, mess-proof and clean as well as being luxuriously soft! I get my hammocks and sleep sacks dirty all the

time. But after a good laundering, my favorite hammock is as good as new, which isn't all good!

It takes a few days of rolling around in it to get it to smell right again. When a hammock is new, it smells bad. When it comes out of the laundry it smells like nothing – except one time when Grandma did the laundry, and then the perfume smell was so strong thta I couldn't sleep!

Doing ferret laundry is the easiest way to keep your ferret and your household odor-free. It is much easier than bathing your ferrets. When shopping for hammocks and sleep sacks, make sure that anything you purchase is machine-washable. Hammocks and sleep sacks should be washed every week or two. Colorfastness is a nice feature (some of my sleep sacks are now pink after I washed a red tent with them).

I wash the ferret laundry with a detergent free of dyes and perfumes, because ferrets have sensitive skin, noses and lungs. My mother once washed a load of sleep sacks with a heavily perfumed detergent (to make the ferrets smell sweet), but the ferrets sneezed, snorted and found other places to sleep.

My ferrets prefer lined (or double-layered) hammocks and sleep sacks to unlined ones, perhaps because they are more stable or more comfortable. Even here in Florida, where it is quite warm, my ferrets prefer fleece lining to summer fabrics.



Checklist

Any sleep accessories you acquire should meet the following criteria:

- Machine-washable
- Colorfast
- Tightly woven fabric
- Reinforced seams
- Ferret-safe hardware

favorite fabrics is Polarfleece, because it stays soft but does not “pill” and become lumpy.

Q: What else is important about the fabric in a ferret's hammock or sleep sack?

A: No toenail traps! I hate it when I get up in the morning and wander off to do my duty, and my bed is stuck to my feet!

My former cage buddy Morgan only has 19 toenails. His first owner never clipped his nails and made him sleep on the floor on an old towel. One day, Morgan caught his toenail on the towel and couldn't get loose. He

I'm guessing that the fleece provides more cushion and allows airflow. One of their

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tore his whole nail out! Thank goodness I get my nails clipped every few weeks.

The fabric on any sleeping accessory should be tightly woven to reduce the chance of fraying or seam separation. Separated seams and holey fabric could trap more than just a toenail; it could trap a foot or head. Looser weaves or terrycloth loops also don't stand up to repeated ferret digging to make the bed or repeated washings.

Q: What else do you like or not like about your sleeping accessories?

A: Anything new in the house is automatically mine, because I am the most important ferret in the house. When I went to check out a new hammock, though, I found it was placed in somebody else's cage! I tried to undo the little clippies to move the hammock to my cage,

*“In terms of decorating,
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Ferret bedding should be washed frequently, but be certain to keep your ferrets away from the washer and dryer.

but my foot got stuck in the clippie! Dad had to save me and used his tools to fix those cage clips so I wouldn't get my foot stuck again. Now if only he would move the hammock to my cage!

Hammock hardware is an important consideration, because hammocks have to be hung. Some hammocks have grommet holes in the corners and you supply your own hardware. Suspend these hammocks with shoelaces, small bungee cords or shower-curtain clips. Keep an eye on any clips to make sure that if they become unclipped, the hammock won't fall, or a ferret can't poke its eyes with an open part of a clip.

Because hammocks must be taken down frequently for laundering, use something you can easily remove and fasten. Removable metal parts are easier on your dryer. Some hammocks come with hardware in the form of spring hooks or clips. For attaching hardware, make sure that a ferret can't get a foot caught in the metal parts.

Pillow Problems

Q: Zodiac, can you tell me why some ferrets like to chew and swallow the fabric from their hammocks or sleep sacks? Ingesting cloth could cause potentially life-threatening intestinal blockages!

A: I'm shocked that a ferret would be so silly as to eat bedding, when perfectly good socks are around to eat! I remember a ferret named Bobbin who ate her sleep sacks and hammocks. She stopped when Mom gave her some special fabric chew toys. I would rather have a chewie treat that tastes good, but to each their own!



Be sure that your ferret has plenty of safe chewing alternatives. Many edible chew treats exist that will satisfy the chewing urge. Some ferrets like to chew Velcro, perhaps because of the interesting texture. I provide my ferrets with strips of Velcro as a chewing alternative, which helps to keep their teeth clean.

Even if you provide chewing alternatives, your ferrets may insist on eating cloth. You may have to resort to a sturdy, nylon sleep accessory that is difficult to chew. Alternatively, you can provide your ferret with a cloth rope "bone" (toys for dogs that are safe for ferrets to chew because the small threads are made of 100 percent cotton and are relatively safe to swallow). You may wish to try different laundry detergents or fabric softeners in case these are making the fabric taste good to your ferret.

Tempting Tents

Beyond hammocks and sleep sacks, there are many fun, specialized sleeping and play areas your ferrets will love! One category of sleep accessories stays on the floor. These include tents, igloos and lodges. These typically come with "tent poles" or some other structure to keep the shape of the sleeping area.

Q: OK, Zodiac, you have told us all about sleep sacks, sleep tubes and hammocks. Those are not the only places that you and the other ferrets like to sleep. Tell us about your tents and why you like them.

A: I was so excited when Mom came home with a new cloth cave thingie. It is soft, has a door and is dark inside. It is mine, mine, mine! It has special sticks that keep the roof off me when

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I sleep and just one little entrance so I can make sure only my bestest buddies come in and share!

Other options are suspended tent sleepers for the cage. These hang from the roof or walls of a cage and include playhouses, futons, tunnels, pouches and tubes. Blanca Martinez, a ferret owner from New Mexico, is enthused about new options on the market. “My ferrets just love their fleece cube, and the model that looks like a hot-air balloon is my favorite!” More varieties of ferret sleepers are being introduced, so the possibilities of delighting your ferrets are becoming endless!

Fleece For Feet

Q: Where else could a human catch you sleeping?

A: If I am really exhausted after a busy day of ferreting, I might collapse on the floor of my cage. I am such a busy ferret, running around every few hours to make sure that everything is in its proper place, including the other ferrets. All that hard work is tough on the tootsies, so fabulous flooring in my cage is very much appreciated! I also rest on my nice, fluffy floor anytime I want.

According to Barbara Ludt, a ferret shelter operator, “No ferret should have to walk on wire. Wire grate floors are not only uncomfortable but dangerous, because they can trap ferret feet and cause crippling injuries.”

Whether your ferret's cage has a wire or solid floor, further coverings can ensure the health and comfort of your pet. Another ferret sleeping item is a blanket or cage liner. Fleece blankets can be placed anywhere for a convenient cuddle. Cage liners are fleecy mats that can “carpet” the flooring of your ferret's cage. These mats are far superior to carpet pieces, because they are softer, denser (for safety) and easily laundered. Look for fleece kennel or crate liners from pet supply companies. Avoid the use of bathroom mats that have rubber backing, because ferrets often chew and swallow rubber.

Time for Bed!

We all know that ferrets are the smartest critters in the universe, so I am truly grateful that some human beings were smart enough to figure out how to cater to our sleeping needs. There are so many choices now of size, shape, pattern, fabric and design – and I want them all! Busy ferrets deserve the best.



John Porter

Multiple hammocks stair-stepped in a cage can help ferrets move around and save them from a long fall.

Even though you might have bought the best sleeping accessory in the world, it is up to you as a responsible ferret owner to be vigilant and check for worn fabric, holes, frays, separated seams or other problems that could be a safety issue. Many of these inevitably develop over time. Ferrets like to “make their beds” and dig at their sleepers, which can cause faster fabric breakdown. If you can't repair a problem, replace the item before your ferret gets hurt. When in doubt, throw it out.

I hope the information and fun tips on interior decorating from Zodiac and me help you with your decisions on providing comfortable, stylish sleeping quarters for your ferrets. Good night, and sleep tight! ■

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 sleeping, weasel work, snoozing, treat begging, resting, sock stealing, shut-eye and human training.