

Paw Print Issue #13 July 2011

What does not destroy me, makes me stronger. (Friedrich Nietzsche)

Dear Friends: I am very sorry to report that the Ferret Association of Connecticut (FACT) has had to temporarily close our shelter to all ferret intakes.

For the past 5-6 weeks we have been battling what was first thought to be an allergy. However, after similar symptoms began to show in other ferrets, a virus was clearly at fault. Within days we began to suspect Canine Distemper and began aggressive treatment. It took 8 more days before that diagnosis was finally confirmed. (CD is very rarely seen in ferrets, with only 1 or 2 outbreaks a year occurring in shelters nationally. Many vets, especially in the Northeast, have never seen it, even in dogs.) Canine distemper is generally considered 100% fatal in ferrets.

We have created a Fact Sheet about distemper, shown below. You can also download it as a [pdf](#). Our [website](#) also contains a [Health Advisory](#) about CD. Additional information includes [photos](#) of early symptoms. Many of the photos elsewhere available are of very [advanced symptoms](#) - by the time a ferret begins to show the "classic" signs of CD such as crusted paws, the disease is too far progressed for much hope of recovery.

We urge ferret owners to share this information with their veterinarians, ferret shelters, animal control, or any other animal shelter that might house both dogs and ferrets. All need to be aware of the potential threat to pet ferrets and make sure those in their care are protected from possible contraction.

A total of 39 ferrets were exposed. Of those, 13 developed CD symptoms. Two ferrets died from advanced adrenal disease, never showing any CD symptoms. One ferret died of unknown causes before we even suspected an illness in the shelter.

As of July 12th, FACT has lost a total of 12 ferrets to CD in Connecticut: 11 were from the FACT shelter; 1 ferret was exposed in an adopter's home. One ferret showing symptoms is still alive with continual antibiotic and fluid support. So the good news is that the 23 surviving ferrets appear to thus far be unaffected by the outbreak.

Back tracking intakes and adoptions/fosters, we are pretty certain FACT was exposed by one of either 2 ferrets that arrived from different places on June 3rd. While the first question from people is often "where did you get it?" we want to emphasize that our focus is not on placing blame, but has and remains on caring for the animals in our hands and making sure information is made publicly available so others can quickly identify signs of canine distemper.

Dr. Jerry Murray recently wrote an [article](#) on Canine Distemper for [SmallAnimalChannel.com](#). With his help, FACT has been using a special therapy called polyprenyl immunostimulant. Treatment for the surviving ferrets continues and we will be furnishing Dr. Murray with the health information and data he and the manufacturer have requested.

FACT's board and our vets met last week to review all the data gathered to date about the progress of the outbreak; treatments tried and ongoing; as well as to determine next steps. All surviving ferrets received a second round of vaccinations, after which we need to wait 3 weeks before ordering tests to make sure each ferret is free of the disease. With luck we are hoping we can reopen before Labor Day. Once we can get an "all clear" and have all our results, we will publish the data we have gathered. But here are a few cursory observations:

- Some ferrets that were up to date on their CD vaccine died. Actually we had two pairs of ferrets with the same vaccination history. One of each pair developed symptoms and died, while their surviving companion remains fine. Some ferrets that we knew were out of date by over three years have not shown symptoms.
- Quarantines are essentially ineffectual. The first ill ferret didn't show symptoms until almost 10 days post arrival, and he had a compromised immune system from a recent surgery. In our adopter's home, her ferret did not show symptoms for nearly 21 days.
- The outbreak was the most aggressive in our shelter room with the younger, more transient ferrets. That is where we lost most ferrets. In our second floor, which houses predominately fostered sick/elderly ferrets as well as our Shelter Director's 4 personal ferrets, we only lost 2 out of the 11 ferrets housed there. Both rooms were about equally crowded. Luck? A more established environment? We will probably never know but are grateful that so many did survive.

Until we can reopen, a number of surrenders have come to us and are being housed in temporary quarters, though those are already beginning to fill up fast. If any CT area homes can take in one, two or three ferrets on a temporary basis for at least 4 weeks, please [contact us](#)!

This has been both an organizational and personal tragedy. Our grief at these losses has been tempered by the kindness of friends and strangers who have reached out to help. We sincerely appreciate the emotional support we've received to date, as well as the kind donations of supplies and funds that have been sent by those who read about the outbreak on the Ferret Mailing List and on Facebook.

We have also been blessed with a extremely dedicated team of volunteers who pitched in to help care for all the ferrets even before they were sure exactly what they had to do to protect their ferrets at home. That took great courage and commitment.

We continue to face significant veterinary expenses and any amount you are willing to [donate](#) will be gratefully acknowledged. Thank you for reading this alert and please share it with other ferret owners! Our hope is that the information gathered from deaths of our shelter ferrets can help avert more ferret deaths from this terrible illness.

Ann Gruden, Board of Directors President

Paw Print is the [Ferret Association of Connecticut's](#) online newsletter. You are receiving this message because you contacted us for information. If you do NOT want to be on our e-mail list, please click [here](#) to unsubscribe! FACT never sells or rents our e-mail lists.

Ferret Canine Distemper (CD) FACT Sheet

Ferret Association of Connecticut - July 2011

Affected Animals

CD is considered highly contagious in ferrets. It has been generally accepted that few unprotected animals will survive the disease. A very few fortunate ferrets have survived the disease, but rarely without long term health complications. Therefore prevention is critical.

CD is more rare today than it was before people began proactively getting CD vaccinations for their pets. This demonstrates the broad protection proper vaccination can provide. However, it still exists and should not be treated lightly.

Several wild species of animals like fox, coyotes, raccoons, skunk, mink, and seals can also contract or harbor the canine distemper virus (CDV). Ferret owners with dogs who have the potential to interact with wildlife need to be especially cautious and ensure their dog and ferrets are properly vaccinated and up-to-date.

CD does not affect humans. Cats cannot contract the canine version of distemper. Feline distemper is a similarly dangerous but unrelated virus.

How Does It Spread

Most times the disease is spread by direct animal-to-animal contact (saliva contact from sneezes, drooling, etc.) Fortunately, the virus cannot survive for long in the environment - usually only a few hours. There are exceptions, but they are highly unusual circumstances.

While animal interactions with a surface deposit of the CDV (for example, sniffing fresh urine of an infected animal), the risk of infection, while not impossible, is not the more common route of infection. However, the fact that it can survive for even a short time is very important to those handling infected animals and preventing possible transmission to uninfected animals. Therefore, precautionary measures should be taken as outlined below.

Protect Your Pets

There are highly effective dog and ferret approved vaccines available that have been shown to protect most animals from the virus. In ferrets, veterinarians recommend an initial series of 3 CD shots spaced 2 to 3 weeks apart around age 8 weeks, 11 - 12 weeks and the third at age 14 - 16 with an approved ferret vaccine. (As of July, 2011, only Purevax-D® by Merial Canada is approved for use in ferrets.) Ferrets with an unknown history of CD vaccinations should have 2 shots spaced 3 weeks apart. All ferrets should receive an annual booster shot thereafter.



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Independent Ferret Film Needs Support

The Story

"Jake & Jasper: A Ferret Tale" is a short film about a young boy named Jake ([Connor Stanhope](#), "Smallville") who finds solace in the friendship he develops with a pet ferret after the death of his mother.

Who We Are

The film is written by Alison Parker & David B. Belezny, two filmmakers from Vancouver, BC, Canada. Alison Parker will direct, and Shawn Seifert is the Director of Photography.

Full Synopsis

Struggling to cope with the recent death of his mother, young Jake Tyler retreats from his family and the world at large. After being involved in a violent fight with some older boys at school, he winds up in the principal's office with his father who is told that Jake might benefit from professional help. Unfortunately, Jake's father has been unable to help himself through the loss of his wife. When not neglecting his son and daughter as a result, he's furious with them. Jesse (Jake's sister) is so fed up with her selfish father that she moves out of the house but not without leaving her pet ferret, Jasper, to keep her brother company.

Jake & Jasper become fast friends as the two develop a strong bond. Yet just as this companionship seems on the verge of prying Jake from his shell, his father threatens to take Jasper away. With the thought of losing his best pal, Jake decides to run away from home and the two get lost in a nearby forest. Then when darkness falls Jake & Jasper not only lose each other in the woods, they nearly lose their lives.

Why I'm Making This Film - a Message from Director Alison Parker:

I decided to make the film "Jake & Jasper: A Ferret Tale" for a few reasons. One, I have always been a fan of films that show the bond between animals and humans. There is something so magical about finding love and understanding from a creature that you can't even speak to. Two, ferrets have always been portrayed in a negative way in the media. They are often shown as being aggressive, dangerous, and sometimes even being used as a weapon. This is really ridiculous and has to stop. I don't want everyone to go out and start buying ferrets without researching the proper care and responsibility it takes to own one - only to change the perception people have of what ferrets are. This film will share with the world the joy a ferret can bring to a family, in a story that will surely warm your heart.

Donation Levels

Donations are needed toward the cost of the other animals in the film and handlers (Alison is paying out of

It is important to note that unless an owner was provided with a vaccination record for that specific animal, most ferrets purchased from a pet shop have only had 1 initial shot and should receive at least 1 or 2 additional booster shots following purchase. If there is no record, contact and follow your veterinarian's advice for appropriate booster vaccinations.

Also be aware, that no vaccine is 100% effective. It is always important to be aware of unusual symptoms in your pet and to contact a veterinarian immediately if you have any concerns.

Preventing Its Spread

Animals can carry the CD virus and not show any symptoms of illness, particularly if they have been appropriately vaccinated (not unlike how the flu can be "carried" via vaccinated humans). Frequent hand washing and care following any interaction with other animals before handling your own animals is prudent. Not only can it help stop the spread of animal viruses like CDV but it can also help protect people from zoonotic diseases (diseases that can be passed from animals to humans).

It is not necessary to use antibacterial products; in fact, studies have shown that they are actually contributing to resistant strains of bacteria. Thorough hand washing with soap and water is considered a highly effective means of reducing the spread of many illnesses. Hand sanitizers that are alcohol based can also be used.

If you are handling animals that you know may have been exposed to a disease, additional precautions are urged. Wash any exposed areas of skin thoroughly with soap and water; and change outer clothing and shoes before handling your own pets if you have been handling infected or exposed animals.

It is also suggested you do the same after touching animals in public places such as farms, pet stores, dog parks, fairs, etc. Most of the time the animals there are healthy, but a change of clothes (and leaving your shoes somewhere to dry out completely if you may have walked through any animal waste) can help avoid unnecessary risks.

In shelters or pet stores with multiple species, it is important to ensure that employees and the public thoroughly sanitize their hands before handling another species.

Early Identification in Ferrets

Not all ferrets develop the same symptoms at the same rate or sequence. The most common signs include:

- Retching or vomiting;
- Reddening of the skin around the chin and mouth progressing rapidly (usually within 24- 36 hours) to the groin and rectal area;
- A red rash over the entire body;
- Conjunctivitis - swelling (inflammation) or infection of the eyelids eventually leading to light sensitivity, complete eye closure and crusting over the closed eyes;
- Rectal prolapse;
- Swelling of the legs and eventual crusting on the footpads;
- Nasal discharge with eventual crusting;
- Sores developing on the chin, feet and around the anus.

Any of these symptoms warrant veterinary consultation. More than one and it should be treated as an emergency. Your veterinarian can help you decide on treatment based on the precise symptoms you are observing.

If you think that your ferret may have been exposed to CD, contact your veterinarian immediately to decide what precautions to take.

Treatments

CD is a very dangerous and almost always fatal disease in ferrets. Presently there is no single treatment protocol that has been shown to cure a ferret that exhibits symptoms. While there have been rare reports of individual ferrets surviving, it has required early, aggressive and nearly round the clock supportive therapy over a period of months.

In the 20-year history of the Ferret Association of Connecticut, this has been the first outbreak we have experienced in spite of housing and adopting over 1,400 ferrets. Fortunately, we have not learned of any similar outbreak in a ferret shelter in the New England and tri-state area in as many years.

pocket for other expenses and her own ferrets will jointly star as "Jasper." Simply visit her [project page](#) on the Indigogo website and you can see the "perks" for each level of donation. You can contribute as little as \$10.

FACT Sponsorship

FACT is contributing to the project as part of our mission to educate people about domestic ferrets, and has promised to also assist by urging readers to also contribute. It's a worthy cause, Alison and her cast & crew are professionals, and we are happy to help. When you [donate](#), please let Alison know FACT sent you! Thanks!

Featured Product - Closeout Loopy Loungers



Similar to our reversible sleep sacks but made from "furry fleece." Light & airy for summer but surprisingly durable. Size is 13-14" square. Fully washable. Available in fun tropical colors—like red, yellow, & blue. Please let us choose a color for you. Regularly \$6.50 each.

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\$20 to \$50: +\$7.50 Orders over \$50 ship free!
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Paw Print is published by the [Ferret Association of Connecticut](#), Inc., a nonprofit humane organization dedicated to helping ferret owners, caretakers, and most importantly, the ferrets themselves. Website: www.ferret-fact.org.

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