

Shedding - A Hairy Situation

By Mary Van Dahm in The F.A.I.R. Report, May/June, 1999 Volume VII-Issue 3

Shedding is a natural process that in most animals with fur or hair experience. Ferrets are no exception. Old hairs fall out and new ones grow in. As you stroke your pet's coat you may find an occasional thread of fur in your hand. Sometimes you may even end up with a handful! What is considered a normal amount of shedding for ferrets? When should hair loss cause concern? Can anything be done to stop it or reduce it?

First let's understand the make up of your ferret's coat. A ferret actually has two coats - an undercoat of soft, fine, densely growing fur that acts as a layer of insulation, and a top coat of sleek guard hairs, which help repel dirt and water from the undercoat. The undercoat is usually white to cream in color and can be seen by parting the guard hairs. The guard hairs, on the other hand, encompass a rainbow of colors from black, sable (dark brown), and chocolate (light to medium brown), to cinnamon, champagne, silver and white. The guard hairs give ferrets their distinguishing features, such as their masks and coat patterns.

Ferrets generally shed their coats twice a year. In spring and fall you will probably notice a more abundant hair loss. In the spring ferrets will shed out their excess winter hair growth and replace it with a sleek summer lock. Come fall, ferrets usually reverse the process. Their bodies dispose of old hairs and fill out with a flush winter coat.

There are always exceptions to this rule. Ferrets are very photosensitive; that is, they are affected by the light (either natural or artificial) that they are exposed to. If your ferret is constantly exposed to a lot of light, for instance if you tend to frequently turn the lights on in the room that your ferret spends most of his time in, this can throw his coat cycle off. His coat may not grow in as thick as most normal coats or it may grow in sporadically. You may never even notice a well-defined spring or fall shedding cycle. Some ferrets that are exposed to sudden light changes may drastically blow their coats. Their fur will literally fall out in handfuls and these ferrets may develop a "Kiwi fruit" look. This close cropped fuzz is the new coat growing in and eventually the ferret will look normal again. An interesting, but sometimes startling phenomenon in ferret hair growth occasionally occurs when the new starts forming under the skin. In sable ferrets this new growth will often give the skin a deep blue hue. In chocolate ferrets the skin may appear olive or khaki colored. The ferrets will appear as if bruised, but there is actually nothing wrong with them. This discoloration is especially noticeable about a week or two after the ferret has had surgery, if the surgery was done just before or during the seasonal shed. Another interesting shed pattern that some ferrets develop is a V shaped pattern that usually starts on the forehead or the back of the neck and works its way down the entire body. This will sometimes temporarily give the ferret an unusual striped pattern or sometimes the ferret will have one coat color above the shed pattern and another color below it!

Ferrets can develop a condition known as "stud tail". This is usually a condition found in un-neutered hobs during breeding season when hormonal changes cause the hair on the tail to fall out. Some people believe that excess oils excreted during this time may plug skin pores and also cause this condition to occur. In neutered ferrets irregular lighting can cause a similar condition. The old hairs have received the light cue to fall out, but the new hairs are not yet ready to grow back in. Eventually the body catches up and the ferret's tail hair fills back in.

Diet can also play a strong part in your ferret's hair growth and shedding. A ferret's coat grows from the inside out in more way than one! If your ferret has been raised on a diet of

premium grade ferret food it should show in his coat - soft and shine. Ferrets are obligate carnivores (the MUST have a meat based diet) and need a diet high in meat proteins, fats, and a balance of vitamins, minerals and amino acids. If your ferret is not getting enough nutrition from the food he is eating, the may develop a dry, sparse or brittle coat. It is important that you get your ferret on a better diet right away before permanent developmental damage is done. Some ferrets will resist sudden changes in their diets and you may have to mix some of your ferret's old food in with the new food until you can wean him completely over. To help your ferret get back on the right track, you can also offer him an oil based fatty acid supplement such as Mrs. Allen's Shed-Stop, Ferretone, Furotone, Linatone, etc. If your ferret likes the taste of these supplements, you can put a few drops on his new food to help entice him to eat it. Be sure to change the food regularly so the oils don't go rancid. Eventually you should be able to stop putting the oil on the food and just offer a few drops a day as a treat or reward instead. Some manufacturers of fatty acid supplements may tell you to pour their product all over your ferret's food, but if your ferret is on a premium diet, this should not be necessary. Too much oil can cause gastric upset or diarrhea and can lead to obesity. Don't be discouraged if you don't see results in your ferret's coat right away. Sparse coats and brittle hair take a while to rebuild and you might not see any results until your ferret's next seasonal coat change. If your ferret's coat continues to get worse, you may be facing other problems besides an improper diet.

Your ferret's health also has an important influence on your ferret's coat and shedding. If your ferret is sick, your ferret's body will divert the nutrients it digests into energy to fight off whatever sickness is affecting him. If your ferret's body does not receive enough nutrients and disperse them properly, then your ferret's body will first draw these nutrients away from what it considers to be the most expendable feature of your ferret, which is your ferret's coat. If the illness persists, then the ferret's body may start drawing needed energy, from muscle mass and bone density, after the fat reserves are depleted. Hopefully you will have gotten your ferret in to see a veterinarian before these latter stages develop!

I previously mentioned the effect of hormones on hobs in rut. There is also a hormonal condition that affects jills (intact female ferrets) and can cause their hair to fall out. This condition is called hyperestrogenism. Hyperestrogenism is caused by the jill being left in heat (estrus) too long. The high levels of estrogen can cause the hair to become thin or fall out in uneven patches. Breeding her or spaying her early in the heat cycle can help her avoid this potentially dangerous condition. There are also shots that your ferret can receive to take her out of heat. Unfortunately hair loss from hyperestrogenism isn't the only problem your ferret can face. A severe condition called aplastic anemia can also develop. The high levels of estrogen cause the ferret's bone marrow to stop producing red and white blood cells. Without red blood cells, oxygen and nutrients cannot be carried through the blood stream to sustain life, and without white blood cells your ferret's immune system becomes depressed and pneumonia or other diseases can set in. A high percentage of jills die from this condition every year, so your best bet, if you are keeping your ferret as a family pet and not for breeding purposes, is to have her spayed just before (or early into) her first heat. This is usually around six or seven months of age. Most pet shop ferrets are spayed or neutered as kits, so this may not be a problem to you and your pet.

Another health problem that can cause severe hair loss is adrenal disease. This problem is fairly common in ferrets over three years of age. Adrenal tumors may grow on one or both adrenal glands. There is still a lot of speculation as to what causes these tumors in ferrets. The results of the disease, however, are fairly obvious, with patterned hair loss being the most

common indicator. Generally, a ferret shedding his coat due to adrenal disease will start with hair loss at the base of the tail. This alopecia (hair loss) usually works its way up the back and down the tail in a fairly symmetrical pattern. The ferret may eventually lose hair over 90% of his body. The most common treatment for this disease is surgical removal of the affected adrenal gland. Fortunately most adrenal tumors are benign and the success rate for this surgery is good. If you think your ferret is developing this disease, be sure to talk to your veterinarian about it. With adrenal disease, no amount of good food or vitamin supplements will bring your ferret's coat back without medical intervention. If your ferret had been on a good diet, though, his chances of a quicker recovery after surgery increase.

The last major cause of shedding or hair loss in ferrets is allergies. Just like people, ferrets can suffer from a variety of allergies in their environment. The two most common allergies that ferrets suffer from are food allergies and topical allergies. Food allergies usually cause digestive problems in ferrets (vomiting, nausea or diarrhea), but can eventually lead to hair loss due to stress or nutritional deficiencies in the body. Corn gluten meal intolerance is a common food allergy in ferrets. Topical allergies are caused by irritants to the skin. Some common irritants to ferrets are detergents or fabric softeners, cedar shavings, corn cob bedding (a common source of mildew), household cleaners (which can also be toxic to ferrets), and bug bite dermatitis. Fleas, ticks, and flies love to attack small animals that run low to the ground. Ferrets are no exception. If you notice that your ferret is afflicted with any of these little pests, be sure to treat him and his surroundings immediately. A few fleas can multiply into a few hundred in a very short period of time. Be sure to use flea and tick products that are safe for your ferret. Most products won't say "Safe for ferrets," on the label, but most products that are safe for young kittens are usually safe for ferrets. If you have any questions or doubts, don't be afraid to contact your veterinarian to see which products he or she recommends. You can call local ferret shelters and clubs and see what they recommend.

Now that we have discussed some of the causes of shedding and hair loss, here are a few tips on dealing with unwanted hair. Brushing your ferret's coat with a ferret brush or a soft cat brush at least once or twice a week will help remove some of the loose hairs that may collect in his coat. Bathing your ferret once a month can help remove dead hair, too. Don't over bathe your ferret, though, or you may dry out his skin and strip his coat of needed oils, and make his shedding worse. If your ferret is going through a heavy shed or blowing his coat, you should brush him at least once a day during this period. Some ferret owners will even "pluck" their ferrets' coats. This is a process where you gently pull out the patches of loose hair. If you feel resistance and the hair isn't coming out easily, then the hairs are not ready to come out yet and should be left alone. You don't want to cause your pet discomfort!

Your ferret will try to do a lot of his own grooming, too. You may see him licking or biting at his coat. Some ferrets will not groom themselves in front of people and will do it only when they are alone, or after you have gone to bed.

Small amounts of hair will usually pass through the stomach along with your ferret's food. Sometimes, though, this hair will collect and form a hairball. This is especially likely if the ferret is experiencing a heavy shed. It is important to give ferrets a hairball laxative on a regular basis - usually two to three times a week. During their seasonal sheds, it is recommended that they get this laxative daily. You don't have to give them much - about a 1/2 inch ribbon of laxative will do. This is enough to keep the hair in the stomach lubricated and let it slide through the intestines. Most ferrets enjoy the flavor of the hairball laxative and will look forward to their 'weasel grease' as a treat. Ferrets generally cannot cough up hairballs

like cats do. If a hairball does form in your ferret's stomach, your ferret will most likely have to have surgery to get it taken out. This can be an expensive operation and it is usually avoidable with a few pennies worth of the laxative.

The final thing that you will need to do for your ferrets is to keep his bedding and cage clean. Even if you brush your ferret during his shedding period, loose hair may collect on his bedding or on the wires of his cage. This loose hair may then blow around the floor, or worse, your ferret may ingest it. Washing your ferret's bedding once a week on a regular basis and twice a week during shedding seasons will help keep your ferret's cage and play area cleaner. This will also keep your ferret smelling fresher, since washing the bedding prevents musk oils from building up in the bedding.

Remember - no ferrets are shed free, but with a good diet, proper veterinary care, and a little grooming you should be able to make the best of a hairy situation!