Canine Distemper in Ferrets

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Canine Distemper (CD) is a contagious disease caused by a paramyxovirus this virus causes ferret distemper. The virus can be transmitted to ferrets directly from infected animals or through contact with infected material left on your shoes and/or clothes. What this means is even if your ferret doesn’t go outside you can still bring this in to your ferrets on your shoes, pants, jacket…etc.

CLINICAL SIGNS

The clinical signs of CD start within 7 – 10 days after exposure to the virus. It starts with mild conjunctivitis (inflammation of the eyelid lining), greenish-yellow discharge from the eyes and nostrils, anorexia, lethargy, and high fever. A rash/redness and thickening of the skin appears under the chin (see photo), lips, and around the anal area. This progresses into thick crusting of the area and hyperkeratosis (extremely hard thickening) of the foot pads. Other signs that can be seen include diarrhea, bizarre behavior, seizures, and central nervous system damage. The younger the ferret, the more quickly it will develop brain damage.

DIAGNOSIS

Because the progressive signs of distemper are so typical, the disease is rarely confused with other conditions. There is a blood test that can be run for distemper in ferrets but normally the clinical signs are sufficient to presumptively diagnosis this in ferrets.

TREATMENT

There is no treatment for distemper in ferrets. This disease in ferrets virtually has a nearly 100% mortality rate. If the ferret is severely affected it is best and most humane to consider euthanasia. Occasionally a mild or moderately affected ferret can survive the disease. These ferrets can be treated with antibiotics, fluids, syringe feedings, and serum from properly vaccinated ferrets against CD. Recovered ferrets suffer permanent effects from the skin, foot, or brain damage that occurs during the disease. The ferret’s behavior may be altered significantly if the brain has been affected by the disease.

VACCINATION

Distemper vaccines that are approved for ferrets are recommended for inoculation. There are only two companies that have distemper vaccines available for ferrets, namely Fervac D by United Pharmaceutical
Co. and Purevax by Merial. Fervac is a modified live vaccine and Purvax is a plasmid mediated vaccine. They are administered subcutaneously at 6, 9, and 12 weeks of age and then booster annually depending upon the health of the animal and veterinary recommendations.

Distemper vaccines for use in dogs can revert to a virulent form and induce distemper disease in the ferret. Therefore, do not use canine cell culture Distemper vaccines in ferrets. Also ferrets do not get other canine or feline diseases, such as Infectious Canine Hepatitis, Parvovirus, Parainfluenza, Feline viral rhinopneumonitis, Calicivirus, and therefore do not need to be and should not be vaccinated with multi-valent dog and cat vaccines. Canine and feline vaccines may cause anaphylactic reactions.

VACCINE REACTIONS

Vaccine anaphylactic (allergic) reactions to the distemper vaccine happen occasionally. The majority of the reactions are not life threatening, but they are uncomfortable for your pet and frightening to see. Severe reactions are possible, which is why we ask for our clients to stay at the clinic for at least 15 - 20 minutes after the vaccination. We wish to avoid any serious problems with your pet, so we recommend the following when visiting us for any vaccine:

- Allow enough time to be able to sit at the veterinary office for at least 15 - 20 minutes after the appointment to watch for any adverse reactions.
- Watch for signs of a vaccine reaction in the waiting room such as vomiting, excessive salivation, pawing at the mouth, bright redness of the mucous membranes, diarrhea.
- Continue to watch for vaccine reaction signs over the next 24 hours after the vaccination such as weakness, rapid and shallow breathing, vomiting, diarrhea, depression, ataxia (poor coordination), collapse and/or blue oral mucous membranes. Streaks of blood may be seen in the diarrhea and/or vomit.
- Call your veterinarian or emergency clinic immediately to report any unusual signs and for instructions on what needs to be done.

The treatment for a vaccine reaction depends on the severity of the response. Usually antihistamines, corticosteroids, homeopathic and fluid treatments are used. Most ferrets respond quickly with these treatments and do not need to be hospitalized. For severe reactions hospitalization is recommended. Ferrets that have had prior vaccine reactions should be pre-treated with antihistamines and possibly a homeopathic remedy at least 15 minutes prior to the vaccination. Make sure that your veterinarian is aware of the ferret’s previous vaccine reaction and that time needs to be allocated for the pre-treatment prior to the vaccine.

Although there is a risk of vaccine reaction, it is still highly recommended to properly vaccinate ferrets. The chance of survival from infection with distemper is very poor, while survival after a vaccine reaction is high with a complete recovery expected.