GENERAL
Ferrets are wonderful, curious little creatures that are becoming more and more popular amongst pet owners in the United States. Though many people mistake ferrets for rodents, they are actually mustelids that are related to polecats, badgers, weasels, stoats, and otters. Ferrets have a long history of domestication of over 2,000 years, where humans have utilized ferrets to hunt rodents and rabbits. Nowadays, ferrets are more often bought as a companion pet due to their active, playful, curious, and affectionate nature when properly raised. Ferrets come in a variety of colors and patterns with the most common being brown, white, tan, yellow, or black. Some are solid colored and others are multicolored with facial “masks”. Ferrets have an average life span of 5-8 years, but have been known to live up to 12-13 years old. Therefore, ferrets can be a great companion for a long time to come.

DIET
Ferrets are strict carnivores, so any food you provide for them must be meat-based dry kibble. Dog foods and many cat foods are made with grains or grain by-products and should not be fed to your ferret. Formulated ferret foods and some high-quality kitten foods are manufactured with higher levels of protein and fat that your ferret needs to thrive. Additionally, it has been noted amongst owners that ferrets on a proper diet tend to smell less than those being fed lower quality food. As ferrets are not meant to digest carbohydrates, their skin oils and bowel movements become much smellier as a result. By buying a good, high-quality food for your ferret, you will be ensuring that your pet has the best available chance at a long, healthy life.

HOUSING
Ferrets are highly social and curious creatures that require a lot of exercise, stimulation, and area to live and express normal behaviors. As they are social creatures, it is highly recommended that ferrets be housed in pairs or groups to add both companionship and enrichment. Ferrets from the same litter tend to get along extremely well, and some caution should be used when introducing ferrets of different litters, sexes, and ages. The majority of ferret owners keep their animals caged while away from the home, but some opt to have their ferrets free roam in a dedicated, ferret-proofed room. As ferrets are curious and nimble, they will explore every hole, corner, and crevasse available to them. As such, special precautions must be taken to ensure their safety. Ferret-proofing can include covering outlets, lowering couches, removing carpet, putting up gates, and more depending upon the specific situation. Regardless of caging preferences, ferrets should interact with people for at least 2 hours each day to keep them stimulated and bonded to the owner. Ferrets enjoy playing with toys, exploring tunnels, digging, and interacting with humans. The more environmental enrichment your ferret has, the happier it will be.

As for housing, many commercially available ferret cages are being sold. It is recommended not to house ferrets in a single-story cage. Ferrets need exercise and the ability to observe their environment from different heights and angles. As such, ferrets should be housed in a cage with multi-level platforms and shallow ramps to facilitate these behaviors. Cages should have small spaces between the bars that ferrets cannot wiggle their way through. A solid bottom floor should be used and should be deep enough to hold at least a 2-inch layer of bedding. The best bedding to use is paper bedding that is changed weekly. Wood shavings should be avoided as they can contain toxic chemicals and dust which can interfere with your ferret’s breathing.
Ferrets are instinctually clean animals that prefer to keep their toilet, food, and sleeping areas separate. As such, a corner litter pan should be used in the preferred corner of their cage to facilitate easy cleaning. Ferret urine causes the most odor in the cage, so the litter should be scooped and changed daily to keep the smell down. Like the bedding, a dust-free litter should be used to prevent breathing problems. Ferrets prefer to sleep in warm, closed nooks. As such, ferrets prefer sleeping places like hammocks, cubes, and other soft cloth structures that can be either suspended from the cage or on the floor of a platform.

HEALTHCARE
In the United States, the majority of ferrets are bred by Marshall Farms. These ferrets will be sold commercially in pet stores and will have already been spayed or neutered, tattooed for identification, and de-scented. De-scented refers to the surgical removal of the anal glands which can release a small amount of noxious fluid, similar to a skunk. The reason for these procedures is to prevent health problems of intact ferrets, reduce roaming and other sexual behaviors, and to reduce the natural odor of the ferret.

Like other companion animals, ferrets require regular trips to the veterinarian to screen for and prevent diseases that may occur. Ferrets acquire many of the same diseases that dogs, cats, & humans may get and should be vaccinated accordingly by your veterinarian.

Some diseases ferrets can get include:

- Rabies
- Canine Distemper
- Human Influenza
- Aleutian Disease
- Bordetellosis
- Leptospirosis
- Tuberculosis
- Salmonellosis
- Listeriosis
- Cancer

Ferrets should be regularly vaccinated against rabies and canine distemper, but the other common diseases of ferrets are not vaccinated for regularly. Therefore, if your ferret shows any odd behaviors or symptoms, you should contact your veterinarian immediately. Ferrets are stoic creatures when it comes to pain, so even the slightest behavioral change can indicate a major health problem. Signs to worry about in the ferret include coughing, sneezing, open-mouthed breathing, watery eyes, diarrhea, vomiting, weight loss, hair loss, lack of appetite, lethargy, odd swellings, and sensitivity to touch. Any of these symptoms can be an indicator of poor health and the sooner they are addressed, the better off your ferret will be.

Altogether, ferrets can make an excellent companion and addition to the family with the proper housing, nutrition, enrichment, and handling. The more time spent interacting with and training a ferret, the happier and more affectionate your ferret will be. A good relationship with a ferret-friendly veterinarian is necessary and helps to ensure your pet will live a long, healthy life.

REFERENCES
