

My ferret looks he is going bald. He's eating fine and still playful. He isn't scratching or pulling out his fur, it must be just falling out. What could be wrong?

A very common cause of ferrets losing their hair is a hormonal problem, known as adrenocortical disease. Over 40 % of ferrets over 3 years old will develop this problem. The first area to start to lose hair is generally the tail. The tail will take on the appearance of a rat's hairless tail. Then the loss of hair will be noticed on the body. In female ferrets another symptom is an enlarged vulva. In male ferrets, the prostate gland can become enlarged causing trouble urinating. You may notice behavioral changes. All of these symptoms relate to an overproduction of hormones by the adrenal glands. The gland becomes hyperactive either due to benign enlargement or because of a tumor in the gland.

There are at least three theories about why the glands become enlarged and produce too much hormone. The first is genetic; some ferrets may be genetically predisposed. The second has to do with the standard practice of spaying and neutering baby ferrets before they are sold through pet stores. The pituitary gland in the brain keeps sending out its hormonal messages to the body that are normally received by the ovaries and testes. In neutered ferrets, there are no sex organs, so the hormonal messages are received by the adrenal glands which also have the ability to produce the sex hormones. These hormones cause the symptoms described above. The third explanation has to do with the amount of light pet ferrets are exposed to. In the wild, ferrets spend a lot of the day in burrows underground and are only active about 8 hours a day. In a home they may be in rooms where there is light 16 or more hours a day. This abnormal light:dark ratio plays havoc with their hormones.

Diagnosis is generally done by blood tests for hormone levels, or an ultrasound to look for an enlarged adrenal gland. Treatment can be surgical, by removing the adrenal gland or glands that are enlarged. The surgery is fairly risky particularly if the right adrenal gland is removed as it is very close to a major vein, the vena cava. Hormones can be given by injection to block the stimulation of sex hormones by the adrenal. A fairly recent therapy involves a slow release blocking hormone implant under the skin. This implant slowly dissolves and has to be replaced every year but is often quite successful.

Of course, there are other causes for your ferret's hair loss that your veterinarian will investigate.

Francine K. Rattner, V.M.D.

South Arundel Veterinary Hospital