



Animal &
Plant Health
Agency

Preventative Measures regarding SARS-CoV-2 and Ferrets in the UK

December 2020

I wish to share the latest guidance to minimise the risk of transmission of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19 in humans, to domestic ferrets in the UK.

Key Messages

- This guidance is intended for ferret owners and vets who look after those ferrets.
- Ferrets are closely related to mink and given the recent reports of SARS-CoV-2 infected mink in Europe, this guidance is to allay any concerns and remind owners of their responsibilities.
- Ferrets are susceptible to infection with SARS-CoV-2 virus (COVID-19 virus) from their human contacts. They may potentially be able to pass it back to uninfected people.
- Disease in ferrets should usually be mild, but if your ferret falls ill, you should seek veterinary advice.
- If you have (or think you have) COVID-19 you should take steps to prevent your ferret from getting infected.
- If you are required to self-isolate you should minimise contact with any ferrets in your household as much as possible. Your ferret will need to be kept at home for three weeks to be assured it is not infectious.

Background

As you probably know, SARS-CoV-2 has been found in a very small number of cases in companion animals, zoo animals and in a considerable number of mink farms in several countries around the world. Not all of the animals show signs of disease, and when they do, these are typically very mild: usually a combination of fever, loss of appetite and respiratory and digestive system clinical signs. However, in the case of mink, there can be increased mortality on mink farms. There are no mink farms in the UK, but nevertheless, we are concerned about the possibility of infection in the closely related population of ferrets in the UK.

The first country to report isolation of SARS-CoV-2 in farmed mink was the Netherlands, followed by Denmark. At present at least seven countries in the world have reported isolation of SARS-CoV-2 in farmed mink. The usual transmission route of SARS-CoV-2 is from infected people to the mink. Once SARS-CoV-2 is present in the mink, it is thought to be mainly spread to other mink through direct contact or via inhalation of respiratory droplets/aerosols. In a small number of cases, the infection has spread back from mink to people working on affected mink farms.

In some cases the virus has mutated in the mink, most likely as a result of adapting to the new host animal in these intensive farming operations. Some of these new mink viruses were then detected in people who had close contact with the farms. Interestingly, in

Denmark one particular variant found in a small number of people was less readily killed by human SARS-CoV-2 antibodies than other variants, which raised concerns that if one of these variants spread easily in people, it could impact on the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions, e.g. vaccination.

We now want to raise awareness with keepers of ferrets and veterinarians looking after ferrets. It is possible similar mutation events may occur in animals, even small groups, which contract infection as a result of human contact. Ferrets, which are closely related to mink, are one such species of concern.

Situation in the UK

Mink farming has been banned in the UK since the early 2000's, so the ferret is the only species of captive *Mustelinae* that is in regular close contact with people, either as pets, working animals or research animals. The main route where ferrets may be exposed and possibly become infected is by direct contact with infected people, or by being in close proximity to them (hands-face-space). This is especially relevant in high density settings, such as breeders, working animal collections, and/or those premises with a higher number of interactions between ferrets and people from multiple origins, for example at petting farms and zoos; animal science colleges; or sanctuaries/rehoming centres. There is also a potential risk that ferrets could transfer infection back to people, as has been reported on some mink farms in Europe, where mink have transferred SARS-CoV-2 back to humans.

Advice to ferret owners

In order to help prevent transmission of SARS-CoV-2 from people to ferrets in the establishments referred to above, you should adhere to the following advice:

- Avoid contact with ferrets during your self-isolation period. For example because you, or someone in your household has had a positive COVID-19 test or have symptoms suggestive of it (persistent cough, fever and loss of taste and smell are the most common ones); if you have been identified as a contact of someone with confirmed COVID 19; or any other reason. This includes avoiding both direct contact, such as touching, petting, playing and grooming, and also indirect contact through handling items with which the ferret will come into contact (for example food, bedding, toys). During the self-isolation period, where possible, a member of the household not thought to be suffering from COVID-19 should carry out the caring responsibilities.
- If ferrets show signs suggestive of SARS-CoV-2 infection (for example, loss of appetite, lethargy, mild respiratory and digestive signs) you should contact your vet by phone as soon as possible. The vet may decide to sample the affected ferret(s) to test for SARS-CoV-2.
- Since it is believed that mink and ferrets may remain infectious for longer than people, you should isolate your ferret for three weeks (21 days) if:
 - You or any of your household are self-isolating.

- You have brought ferrets to the UK from a country not on the travel corridor list.
- The ferret has had a positive test for SARS-CoV-2.

Isolation means avoiding close contact between the ferret and other ferrets or people (hands-face-space). During the isolation period, you should restrict the animal to its immediate home environment and avoid using the ferret for work or recreational purposes. If your ferret needs emergency veterinary care, you should contact your vet for advice, and you should explain the household situation.

And in-line with the current public health guidance, in addition to the advice above you should:

- wash your hands before and after any contact with your pet, its food and bedding
- do not share food with your pet
- avoid close contact with the animal such as kissing or cuddling if you are self-isolating.

And Remember

- Ferrets are susceptible to infections with SARS-CoV-2 virus (COVID-19) from their human contacts. They may potentially be able to pass it back to uninfected people.
- This would be a very rare event, and there have not been any reports elsewhere of this occurring, nevertheless pet owners need to be made aware of the potential.
- If you have (or think you have) COVID-19 you should take steps to prevent your ferret from getting infected.
- During your self-isolation period you should minimise contact with any ferrets in your household as much as possible.
- Disease in ferrets should usually be mild, but if your ferret falls ill, you should seek veterinary advice. Your vet can discuss with you whether testing would be recommended.
- You should isolate your ferret for 3 weeks (21 days), if you or somebody else in your house are self-isolating; if you have brought ferrets from a country not in the corridor list; or your ferrets has had a positive test to SARS-CoV-2.

Sources of further advice

For further advice on SARS-CoV-2 and animals, you should consult the relevant national guidance at the following links.

England: [Coronavirus \(Covid-19\): advice for people with animals - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/urls/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-for-people-with-animals)

Scotland: [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): advice for animal owners - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/urls/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-for-animal-owners)

Wales: [Advice for pet owners: coronavirus \(COVID-19\) | GOV.WALES](https://gov.wales/urls/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-for-pet-owners)

Northern Ireland: [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Advice for animal owners](https://www.nisra.gov.uk/urls/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-for-animal-owners)