



Epizootic Catarrhal Enteritis (ECE)

(E= rapid spread; C= inflamed mucous membrane; E= intestinal inflammation)

Q: What is ECE (also known as Green Slime Disease)?

A: ECE is a very serious and potentially fatal enteric or intestinal disease in ferrets. It is thought to be caused by a virus. The earlier it is diagnosed and supportive care begun, the better the chance the ferret will have for recovery.

Q: What symptoms will a ferret with ECE show?

A: There are three stages of illness associated with ECE. Each stage has different symptoms. An individual ferret may show all, some or none of these symptoms.

Stage 1: vomiting, inactivity, lack of appetite, and dehydration

Stage 2: large volumes of watery, greenish colored diarrhea that may change in appearance to a yellow grainy brown

Stage 3: 2-3 weeks after the first bout of diarrhea some ferrets develop ulcers in the mouth, stomach, and intestines.

An animal which appeared to be getting better suddenly stops eating. Feces may become dark black and tarry looking. The black feces results from blood digested from the stomach and intestinal ulcers.

Q: Can ECE be treated?

A: ECE cannot be treated directly, but rather with prompt intensive inpatient care (supportive and symptomatic) it is possible to counteract the disease and success is favorable. The intensity of treatment depends on the severity of the disease. The virus makes ferrets vulnerable to secondary bacterial infections, and additional antibiotics might be prescribed to prevent the ferret from becoming more ill. There are several “stomach protectants” that may help prevent some ulcers. Since affected ferrets may not want to eat or drink, syringe feeding and placement of an I.V. catheter might also be required. This will help meet the animal’s fluid and caloric needs and prevent further weakness from low blood sugar.

Q: How is ECE spread?

A: ECE is spread by the “fecal/oral” route. Within 48-72 hours after exposure the typical symptoms that appear include: sudden anorexia, lethargy, and vomiting. Often young ferrets can be asymptomatic carriers (showing no symptoms) or carry the disease in a mild to moderate form. Older ferrets are at high risk of infection, and can be severely affected by the disease; especially with concurrent insulinoma or gastrointestinal, cardiac or adrenal disease. A ferret can become infected if food (or anything else a ferret puts in its mouth) has come into contact with contaminated feces. Only a minute quantity of contaminated material is enough to carry and spread the virus. Even clothing, shoes and hands can put an animal at risk.

Q: If my ferret survives the illness will there be any long-term issues?

A: Relapses are common following resolution of symptoms. Problems that can persist after the stools become normal may include: hind limb weakness, low body weight, and loose feces. Malabsorptive diarrhea may persist for weeks to months. Other symptoms may continue for several months and the original symptoms of diarrhea and vomiting may resurface during stressful times. For the next 10 months your ferret may spread the virus even if it appears and acts completely normal. For the protection of other ferrets, your ferret should remain in strict isolation.

Q: Can my ferret get ECE again?

A: It is unsure as to whether long term immunity results from an episode of ECE.

Q: Can I protect my ferrets from ECE?

A: There is no vaccine available against ECE. To safeguard your ferrets, begin by keeping them away from other ferrets and practice good hygiene. Thorough disinfection is required, especially if you own other ferrets. Some ferrets are “carriers” (infected but not showing symptoms), and if you do not wash well, and change your clothes before touching your ferret you can unwittingly pass on the virus. Items in contact with other ferrets such as dishes, toys, bedding etc. can be disinfected in a 1% chlorine bleach solution.