ECE: a.k.a. The Green Slime Disease

By Kristen Onasch, The Ferret Expert @ TheFerretStore.com

Have you just adopted a ferret from a pet store or plan to? Then this is some very important information for you to know! First seen in 1993, Epizootic Catarrhal Enteritis, or ECE, is a highly contagious virus. Characterized by neon green, slimy diarrhea, ECE is an inflammation of the mucous membranes in the intestines. Though it has almost a 100% infection rate, the mortality rate is only 2% to 3% when treated correctly. ECE is a very common problem, especially among pet store kits. So how can you recognize the symptoms, and once the disease is diagnosed, how can you treat it?

**Symptoms:** There is no test for ECE, so your vet will need to diagnose the illness by recognizing the symptoms and then eliminating other diseases. The symptoms are vomiting, diarrhea, lethargy, dehydration from the excessive diarrhea, and extreme weight loss (some ferrets can lose up to 50% of their weight).

Diarrhea is usually the first sign you will see. It will be very foul smelling and possibly projectile. There are three different kinds of diarrhea associated with ECE. Green Slime is the most noticeable kind. You will see this in the first 2-4 days. DO NOT assume that because you don’t see this diarrhea anymore that the illness is gone. The color and texture will change as the disease progresses. The next one may be a runny yellow/gold diarrhea that may be bubbly as well. If you see a jelly-like material with grainy or seedy material in it, it is a sign of malabsorption. This means that your ferret is at the point where it is not properly digesting food and is in real danger.

It is most common to see ECE in your house following the introduction of a new ferret, though it is possible to bring it home on your skin and clothing after coming into contact with a ferret who is infected or a carrier for the disease. Ferrets will spread the disease among themselves through bodily fluids, feces, and direct contact. Symptoms will usually present within 2-3 days after bringing in a new ferret.

**Treatment:** NOTE: If you do not treat your ferret, it will die!

Unfortunately, since ECE is a virus, there is no actual cure, just treatment for the symptoms. Medication given will help to relieve symptoms, and prevent or fight secondary infections. Treatment should have four parts - subcutaneous fluids, electrolyte replacers, supplemental feedings, and antibiotics.

Subcutaneous fluids: These are vital at the beginning of the treatment to combat dehydration. It is recommended that the ferret get 15 cc’s of sub-q fluids per pound three times daily. So if your ferret weighs two pounds, it would...
get 30 cc’s, three times a day, for a total of 90 cc’s.

**Electrolyte Replacers:** They should either be in their water or mixed into Duck Soup to pick up where the Sub-Q fluids left off. Some choices are Pedialyte, Gatorade, and Marshall Ferret Aide.

**Supplemental Feedings of Duck Soup:** It is very important that your ferret be given a bland diet (easy to digest) that is high in calories. A good recipe is:

- 1 can of Feline A/D
- Ensure/Sustecal (small quantities, due to sugar)
- Uncle Jim’s Original Duk Soup Mix
- Gerber’s Chicken & Chicken Gravy Baby Food

Your ferret will need to be fed at least four times a day. The absolute minimum a ferret can live on is 20 cc’s, three times a day, or 60 cc’s total.

**Antibiotics:** You will want a systemic antibiotic, such as Amoxicillin. As mentioned before, this will not cure the ECE, but it will prevent secondary infections.

You may also want to use digestive aids such as Carafate or Pepto-Bismol to ensure that your ferret will be able to keep its food down. If you see any pawing at the mouth, this can be a sign of ulcers, nausea, or low blood sugar. You will need to see your vet for treatment.

Some owners have found that prednisone helps speed up recovery, as it can increase the appetite, reduce the inflammation in the intestines, and stabilize blood glucose levels.

**Recovery:** ECE will run its course for one to three weeks, with otherwise healthy ferrets usually getting through the initial stage in seven to ten days. However, the symptoms of ECE can persist for months. Don’t be alarmed if you continue to see low body weight or seedy stool. It will take a while for the ferret to regain the body weight, and the consistency of the feces will vary from day to day. Additionally, ferrets who have suffered ECE will remain susceptible to episodes of seedy diarrhea following stressful situations or dietary change for the rest of their life. This does not mean that they have the disease again.

The ferret remains a carrier of ECE, shedding the virus, for a minimum of six to eight months after the initial treatment. Some ferret experts think that it could be up to year or longer. You will want to quarantine your ferrets for at least six months after the disease. Do not bring any new ferrets into the house, and limit contact with other people’s ferrets.

**Prevention:** So what can you do to prevent ECE from entering your household?

Quarantine new ferrets for a minimum of 2 weeks for monitoring. During this time, take the ferret to the vet and watch for the telltale green stools, lethargy, vomiting, etc. You may not see signs of ECE.

Prevent or minimize exposure to other ferrets. Do not take your ferret over to a house with a new ferret in it until you are certain that the ferret does not have ECE.

Thoroughly clean your hands and change clothes after handling other people’s ferrets or attending pet events and shows.

Insist that other people wash their hands before touching your ferrets.

Do not handle pet store ferrets.

None of these methods are 100% foolproof, given the ease with which ECE is transmitted. But they will definitely cut down on the risk, and hopefully help you keep your home ECE free!

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**About Kristen Onasch:**
Kristen is the resident ferret expert at TheFerretStore.com and is available to assist our customers with help and advice pertaining to these fuzzy little critters. With over 7 years of ferret experience and 6 ferrets, Kristen’s time is well spent cleaning litter boxes, doling out treats, filling water bottles and topping off food bowls. In her spare time she plays with her ferrets and exchanges duck soup recipes. Isn’t that what ferret ownership is all about? To reach Kristen, email her at kristeno@neeps-inc.com or call her direct at 1-877-320-9162 for ferret advice and information.