

## Manipulable enrichment items ('toys' and PVC tubes)

### Research background, and the Code of Practice requirements

- ❖ Studies show that tubes, balls, chains and other 'toys' to chase, carry or chew, offered in combination, can benefit mink: juveniles may be more playful, cages cleaner, and mink calmer with people (less aggressive or fearful). Fur-chewing and stereotypic behaviour (e.g. nodding) can reduce, as can rates of barrenness ('empties') in females. Pelt quality and weaning litter size may even improve.
- ❖ The Code of Practice requires all pens to contain at least one manipulable item; and that once one is provided, access is maintained for the rest of that mink's life (although old items may be replaced with novel ones: good practice to avoid habituation).
- ❖ The one exception: loose objects (e.g. balls) must be removed while false bottoms are in place, to help cages stay clean and avoid harm to vulnerable newborns from objects carried to the nest-box.

### What types of manipulable enrichment are farmers using, and what are their experiences?

In a Canada-wide study, 44 ranches from 6 provinces were consulted on manipulable enrichments, and the following benefits were reported:

- Calmer mink: less aggressive when handled.
- Less fur-clipping.
- Less chewing (on each other) and fighting.
- Decreased chewing of wood nest boxes.

However, some items tried have proved unattractive to mink; many become less attractive over time; some are too fragile, especially with large males; and others are even dangerous. Superficially similar items also vary in robustness, depending on their source and the mink using them: some makes of wiffle ball are prone to break (then falling out the cage); as are some brands or grades of plastic chain, narrow cable ties, and some used balls from golf courses (especially with large males). Steel items can also stain pale mink. So, experiment with different items and suppliers, and recognize that what works best may differ with colour-type and between adult males, females and juveniles.

### Hanging enrichments

Though potentially labour-intensive to install, these stay clean, never need removing (ideal for whelping pens), and are often highly attractive to mink.

### **What hanging items have farmers successfully used?**

- Lengths of plastic chain (though, as noted, brands and grades vary in their durability).
- Lengths of metal chain (smaller-linked, flat 'furnace chain' seeming especially flexible, interactive, safe).
- Golf balls, suspended via wire through a wide drilled hole (allowing the ball to move; *see Figure 1*)
- Pieces of scrap plastic cage divider (*see Figure 2*).
- Cable ties (if durable [see above] and used safely [see below]).

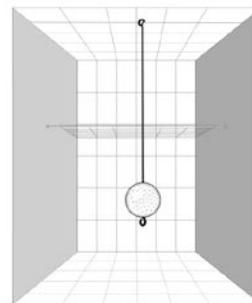


Figure 1: Suspended golf ball



Figure 2: Suspended scrap plastic

### ***Where and how to hang them?***

- 6" or less from the cage floor seems to work well (chain cut much shorter can spring out of the cagetop, becoming inaccessible to the mink).
- Hog rings (two or more for males) provide more durable attachments than cable ties.
- If using cable ties, close them so that no loops are left that could tighten around minks' limbs
- Hanging items will be most effective, attracting the most sustained use, if attached:
  - in a way that maximises their movement;
  - in high traffic locations (e.g. in front of the shelf or drop in nest box) (*see Figures 1,2,3*);
  - so as suspended across cages (e.g. draped over dividers), so that neighbours can pull on it;
  - to a wire running above each block of pens: this enhances attractiveness as they 'jiggle' when any mink in the block interacts with them (*see image 3*).

### **Loose objects on the floor**

Easy to install, some of these are attractive to mink and/or help keep cages clean (especially with pair-housed mink who keep them moving), but they can instead sit little used, so accumulate faeces.

#### ***What loose objects have farmers have successfully used?***

- Golf balls (though, as noted, balls must be compatible with mink to avoid breakage).
- Lengths of PVC pipe (width 4" more): may attract sustained attention as multifunctional (can be chewed, carried and rested in). But **MUST** be much wider than the mink or have a >1" slit cut down the length (*see Figure 4*), to prevent mink getting stuck.
- River rocks – if small enough to be manipulable, but large enough to not settle into the wire mesh of the floor (ideally c.2"x2"), but may still go unused and attract faeces.
- Wood blocks, especially if hardwood (most durable), and rounded (so movable in the cage; flat, square blocks will likely sit unused and attract faeces).

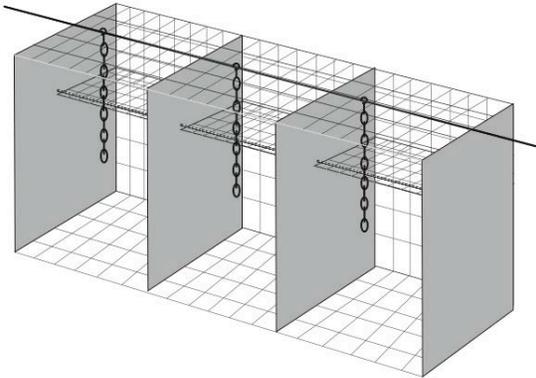


Figure 3: Suspended chain from a wire across pens

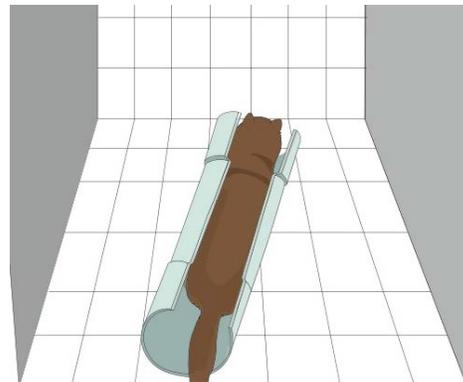


Figure 4: PVC pipe with slit down length

### **Practices to try**

Using multiple enrichments at once may enhance their impact; while installing different enrichments in different cages (e.g. suspended objects in whelping pens vs. loose objects in furring pens) may reduce habituation, as mink experience different enrichments at different stages of their lifecycle.

### **Items to avoid**

- Large wood blocks (e.g. 2"x4"): go unused and accumulate feces.
- Large rocks (e.g. 6" in diameter): not easily manipulated, so go unused.
- Aluminum cans (e.g. pop cans): quickly chewed to pieces, sharp edges pose risks of injury.
- Plastic bottles (e.g. water bottles): chewed to pieces in just a few days.
- Pieces of waterline or garden hose: attractive to mink, but not very durable.