

PRAIRIE DOGS

Life in the Wild

The free-ranging black-tailed prairie dog (*Cynomys ludovicianus*) is a social rodent that lives in “towns”. Prairie dog towns consist of many wards, with family units called coterie. Generally, each coterie includes an adult male, three adult females, and their offspring. Prairie dogs have a very unique communication system that uses body language and verbal cues. The prairie dog gets its name from a warning “bark” emitted when excited or afraid. Wild prairie dogs survive on a diet consisting mainly of grasses and other plants. They also occasionally eat burrowing owl eggs and hatchlings.

Life in your Home

Pet prairie dogs may live 5-10 years. The bulk of the diet should consist of grass hays (i.e. timothy) and grasses. Prairie dogs or “P-Dogs” should also be offered rodent chow and dark, leafy greens. Other vegetables and fruits may also be offered in smaller amounts. Avoid seeds and nuts as treats as they are very high in fat, and prairie dogs already have a tendency towards obesity.

House your prairie dog in a large cage with enough deep bedding to allow for burrowing. Bedding should consist of aspen shavings, straw, or recycled paper products. Provide access to multiple nest boxes and plenty of sticks for gnawing. It may be necessary to place the cage inside a box to catch the bedding that is flung out of the enclosure while the prairie dog is digging. Be aware that prairie dogs are excessive chewers, and they can be extremely destructive if not supervised.

Prairie dogs do not hibernate, however when temperatures drop below 55°F (13°C) they may have dormant periods of semi-hibernation or torpor.

Elective Surgery

Male prairie dogs should be castrated. Intact males tend to become very aggressive and irritable during their breeding season. Castration is an intra-abdominal procedure so the presence of abdominal fat is significant. Since prairie dogs tend to gain additional body fat during the winter months, the best time for castration is between May and October. Castration is best performed during the first year of life. Sexual maturity is reached between 2-3 years of age.

If your prairie dog is overweight, its testicles are likely to be hidden within the intra-abdominal fat making the surgery longer and more technically demanding. Your veterinarian will want to discuss a weight reduction plan with you.

Common Health Concerns

- **Dental disease**-- Prairie dogs possess open-rooted teeth that grow continuously through out life. Malocclusion or crooked teeth growth is sometimes seen. Dental problems may also cause respiratory problems. Odontoma involves an abnormality of the incisor teeth, which leads to pressure on the palate that in turn causes respiratory difficulty. Respiratory signs may include open-mouth breathing, and occasional nasal discharge. Odontoma is usually preceded by a history of trauma to the incisors, such as vigorous chewing on wire cages.
- **Obesity** is a significant problem in the captive prairie dog. Moderate weight gain during the winter should be expected, but the prairie dogs should return to normal weight by spring. Obesity can lead to gall bladder disease, liver disease, and/or heart disease.
- **Respiratory disease** such as pneumonia is not uncommon in the prairie dog. Obesity and poor ventilation may play a role in this problem. Signs of pneumonia include difficulty breathing, discharge from the eyes or nose, loss of appetite, and lethargy.
- **Trauma**-- Problems related to trauma are commonly seen in prairie dogs since they will try to climb, but they are not very agile and will usually fall hurting themselves.
- **Fleas** can also be a problem in prairie dogs.