

Prairie Dogs

Prairie Dog Facts

Scientific Name:	Cynomys ludovicianus
Life Span:	5 – 10 years
Environment Temperature Range:	68F - 72F
Relative Humidity Range:	30 – 70%
Sexual Maturity:	2-3 years
Estrous Cycle:	2-3 weeks
Gestation Period:	30 – 35 days
Breeding Season:	January-March
Weaning Age:	6-7 weeks

Prairie dogs are heavy bodied rodents, which have been referred to as burrowing squirrels. They are native to the grassy plains of western North America from the Dakotas south to northern Mexico. Of the five species of prairie dog (*Cynomys* spp.), which reside in the United States, the black-tailed prairie dog (*Cynomys ludovicianus*) is the species most commonly kept as pets. In the natural state, prairie dogs reside in colonies. Prairie dogs form extensive and elaborate burrows within which they live. They tend to be active during the day, unlike many other rodents, which prefer the nightlife. These rodents are gray to brown in color, with an adult body weight of two to three pounds on average.

Diet and Handling

Diet

The natural diet for prairie dogs consists primarily of grasses. In captivity, the diet should be comprised of rabbit pellets and timothy or other grass hay. The rabbit pellets should be rationed at one-fourth to one-third cup per animal daily, in an effort to reduce the problem with obesity. Timothy or grass hay, on the other hand, can be offered free choice. Alfalfa hay should not be given due to its high calcium to phosphorus ratio, which may predispose the animal to metabolic problems with long-term usage. Supplements to the diet may consist of some fruits, breads and grains; but always in moderation.

As with any animal, a clean, fresh source of water must be available at all times. This can be provided with the typical rodent water bottle equipped with sipper tube. A water bowl may be used, but is less desirable due to greater chance of contamination with food, bedding and fecal waste. The water bottle should be cleaned and thoroughly washed daily.

Handling

The proper procedure for lifting a prairie dog is to wrap one hand around its chest while supporting the hindquarters with your other hand. Be careful when working around their head and face, for they may bite when disturbed or agitated. In addition, they may have sharp claws used for digging, which may serve as weapons when threatened. An old bath towel may be used to wrap around the animal for better control and further protection from these claws. Unlike most rodents, prairie dogs have very little loose skin over their neck to scruff for restraint. When handled frequently, these animals may become rather docile and easy to work with.

Housing and Breeding

Housing

Prairie dogs can be housed within enclosures made of wire, stainless steel, durable plastic or glass. The latter two materials must be used with caution since completely enclosed units greatly reduce ventilation and may lead to respiratory disease as well as humidity and temperature regulation problems.

Ideally, the enclosure should have at least one side open for adequate ventilation, so be careful when using aquariums. Wood should not be used due to difficulty in cleaning and susceptibility to destructive gnawing. The design and construction of the enclosure must be escape-proof. In addition, the cage must be free of sharp edges and other potential hazards. The size of the enclosure should allow for normal activity. The enclosure can remain opened on the top if the sides are at least 10 inches high, as long as other family pets such as dogs or cats are not a threat.

Cage flooring can be either wire or solid. Wire mesh flooring provides a cleaner environment and easier maintenance, but may result in injuries to the feet and hocks. Housing on wire over long periods of time may result in footpad and hock infections from abrasive rubbing on fecal soiled wire. To reduce the incidence of these problems, provide a solid platform as a resting place in one are of the cage. Solid floored cages tend to be more esthetically pleasing when appropriate bedding is used. In addition, deep bedding on solid flooring provides the best conditions for prairie dogs since they should have the opportunity to burrow.

Bedding materials must be clean, nontoxic, absorbent, relatively dust-free and easy to replace. Acceptable beddings are wood shavings, shredded paper, processed ground corncob and commercial pellets. Make sure the ground corncob is properly processed and stored to reduce fungal spore problems. Cedar shavings may lead to respiratory difficulty and liver disease in some rodents so should not be used.

The environment surrounding the pet's cage is another important consideration. Prairie dogs are more comfortable and relaxed when housed in a quiet spot away from noise, excitement and other stresses. Also be sure to select a location away from direct sunlight and avoid cold, damp areas. Prairie dogs do well in a dry, cool environment with adequate ventilation. Drastic environmental changes should be prevented, especially high temperatures and humidity.

Since prairie dogs are social creatures, more than one animal may be safely housed together. In addition, males and females can remain in the same enclosure indefinitely. In fact, in the wild state these animals reside in large colony groups.

Disease Conditions

Obesity

Obesity is a common condition observed in prairie dogs. They have a tendency to become overweight when given unlimited feed and minimal exercise.

It is, however, important to realize that the body confirmation of prairie dogs is typically heavy and stocky. Once they do become obese, these rodents have a much greater tendency towards heart disease and respiratory problems (both will be discussed later in detail). The best way to guard against obesity is to limit access to food pellets (give only one-fourth to one-third cup daily) and provide ample hay. In addition, these animals should be given the opportunity to exercise and burrow.

Pneumonia

Respiratory disease is one of the most common medical problems encountered in the prairie dog. As mentioned above, obesity and poorly ventilated cages often play a role in an animal's susceptibility. Pneumonia can result from a number of viral and bacterial agents. Many of these disease causing organisms routinely inhabit the respiratory tract of clinically healthy animals, and they serve as opportunistic invaders when the pet's body defenses are lowered as a result of stress or other disease. Signs of pneumonia may include difficulty breathing (dyspnea), discharge from the nose and eyes, loss of appetite and lethargy.

Veterinary consultation should be sought when a prairie dog exhibits any of the above symptoms. A bacterial culture with antibiotic sensitivity of the throat and/or nasal discharge may be required to assist the veterinarian in the selection of an appropriate antibiotic. Aggressive antibiotic therapy in addition to supportive care of the patient is often necessary to get the condition under control. Unfortunately, even though elimination of the symptoms may be possible with appropriate therapy, eradication of the causative bacteria may never occur. In addition to treating the symptoms, correction of the predisposing factors is necessary to reduce the chance of recurrence.

Heart Disease

Heart disease occurs in prairie dogs at a higher rate than other rodents. This condition is often associated with obesity and may lead to apparent respiratory disease. Signs of possible heart disease include lethargy, respiratory difficulty, and reluctance to move, sudden collapse, cold extremities and pale to purple discoloration of the tissues lining the mouth (mucus membranes). When any of these signs are observed, veterinary assistance should be sought. A veterinarian can make the diagnosis of heart disease based on the above clinical signs, listening to the heart (auscultation) and chest X-rays. This condition cannot be completely cured, but only clinically managed. The goals to therapy involve correction of underlying factors, such as obesity, and management of the symptoms.

Pseudotuberculosis

Prairie dogs have been shown to be natural carriers of *Yersinia pseudotuberculosis*. This bacterium is spread by fecal contamination. Affected animals exhibit nonspecific signs such as weight loss, lethargy, loss of appetite and diarrhea. To make a diagnosis, the veterinarian may be able to culture the organism from blood, feces or tissues of the affected prairie dog. In addition, enlargement of the spleen, liver and abdominal lymph nodes may be observed. Once a diagnosis has been established, treatment with a broad-spectrum antibiotic and supportive care may be effective.

Ringworm

Prairie dogs are susceptible to mycotic (fungal) infections commonly known as ringworm. *Microsporum gypseum* is the agent most commonly associated with prairie dog ringworm, but infections with other fungal agents cannot be ruled out. Affected animals exhibit areas of hair loss, increased pigmentation and thickened skin over the chest, abdomen, lower back, tail and head. In itself, this condition does not appear to be very itchy (pruritic). A veterinarian can confirm a diagnosis with skin scrapings and fungal cultures. Treatment consists of antifungal agents given topically and systemically.