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CARING FOR YOUR PRAIRIE DOG

Prairie dogs are heavy bodied rodents native to the grassy plains of North America from the Dakotas south to northern Mexico. Of the five species of prairie dog (genus *Cynomys*) which reside in the United States, the black-tailed prairie dog (*Cynomys ludovicianus*) is the most common in captivity. In nature prairie dogs live in colonies and form extensive burrows underground. They tend to be active during the day, and in nature may run and play for hours. Black tailed prairie dogs are stocky and brown, and adults weigh 1 ½ to 2 ½ pounds, occasionally more.

PRAIRIE DOG FACTS:

Life span: 5-10 years

Sexual maturity: 2-3 years

Ideal air temperature: 68-78°F

Ideal relative humidity: 30-70%

Estrous cycle: 2-3 weeks

Pregnancy: 30-35 days

Weaning age: 6-7 weeks

DIET: The prairie dog's natural diet is mostly grasses. In captivity the diet should consist mostly of low protein grass hay such as timothy or oat hay (not alfalfa), and commercial prairie dog pellets such as Oxbow. If a prairie dog diet isn't available, you may substitute a pelleted guinea pig or chinchilla food. The hay is fed free choice always; the pellets should be rationed at ¼ to 1/3 cup per pet daily to minimize obesity. Avoid mixes which contain seeds & nuts, dried fruits, etc. as these may cause obesity or bowel upsets. Fresh vegetables, mostly leafy greens, may be added to the diet (up to 10-15% of the total food intake daily). Minimize vegies in the cabbage family as they may cause digestive upsets. Restrict feeding of sweet items (fruit, corn, baby carrots, tomatoes, etc) and high protein items (seeds, oats, alfalfa, etc) as these may cause bowel upsets also. Provide fresh water always; a rodent water bottle is cleaner than a bowl and can't be spilled. Clean the water bottle every 1-2 days.

BEHAVIOR: With maturity prairie dogs may become more aggressive and difficult to handle. Frequent handling will help keep them tame, and some well-socialized individuals become rather docile. Neutered animals may show less aggression and odor when mature. Nonetheless adult prairie dogs may bite when upset or excited so they should be handled with care. They may gnaw on objects in their environment like many rodents, so must be prevented from damaging wood furniture, baseboards, extension cords, etc. They typically must be confined in a cage when not observed to minimize house damage and maximize safety for the pet. However, like most wildlife they are bothered by confinement and may spend excessive amounts of time gnawing at cage bars due to boredom or attempts to escape. This can cause permanent damage to their teeth. (See **housing** for suggestions to minimize this behavior).

HANDLING: To lift a prairie dog one should gently wrap one hand around the chest from above while supporting the hindquarters with your other hand. Keep your hands behind the head as prairie dogs may bite when upset or agitated. They also have sharp claws. A thick towel may be wrapped around the animal for better control and protection. Covering the head with a towel may make restraint easier for procedures such as nail trimming. Nails should be trimmed every 2-4 weeks depending on growth rate; small pet trimmers or human nail trimmers can be used.

HOUSING: Prairie dogs may be housed in wire, hard plastic or glass enclosures. Solid wall cages must be well ventilated or they can have problems with excess heat and humidity, and buildup of ammonia fumes from urine. Wood is hard to clean and may be gnawed through. The floors can be solid or wire. Wire bottoms allow waste to fall through, but can cause foot sores; provide a solid platform (wood, plastic, or cardboard) in one area to sit on, which can be replaced if chewed or soiled. Heavy straw can be layered over a wire bottom to provide a cushion also.

Solid floors should be covered with straw or shredded paper bedding to absorb wastes; keep the floor clean and dry. Alternate absorbent beddings include hardwood shavings (not pine or cedar), corncob (sterilized to kill fungus), or commercial paper pellets. Prairie dogs are social so more than one may live together, but not all animals socialize well, and ideally introductions should be at a young age. Adult males may fight if not neutered. Provide cardboard chew toys (like toilet paper roll or paper towel roll cores) to gnaw on; avoid wood or metal toys as chewing on these may cause tooth damage. A hanging length of ½ inch thick nylon rope provides a chew toy as well, and may minimize cage bar biting which is a common behavioral problem of captive prairie dogs. Large cages may reduce harmful escape behaviors.

COMMON DISEASES:

OBESITY: Obesity is common in pet prairie dogs, due to inadequate exercise (they may run all day in a natural setting) and due to overfeeding with high calorie diets. Obesity may increase the risk of other health problems. Moderate daily exercise and restriction of pellet intake are recommended. Avoid all high calorie treats (see **diet**).

RESPIRATORY DISEASE: Prairie dogs may develop bacterial (and possibly fungal) respiratory infections with exposure to other animals or moist soiled cage conditions. Dusty bedding or fumes from cedar shavings may irritate the respiratory system also. Signs may include wheezing, labored breathing, lethargy, appetite loss, and nasal or eye discharge. Treatment is with antibiotics and elimination of underlying causes such as dirty cage conditions, poor diet, etc. **NOTE:** Dental disease and heart disease cause similar symptoms; suspect these problems whenever respiratory symptoms fail to respond to antibiotics. **Dental disease** is a very common cause of respiratory distress in prairie dogs.

HEART DISEASE: This is fairly common in prairie dogs and may be associated with high calcium diets or obesity. Signs mimic respiratory infection and may include lethargy, wheezing, labored breathing, bloated appearance, cold extremities, or sudden collapse. This disease isn't curable but medication can reduce symptoms for long periods in some cases. Improving the diet and reducing obesity (when present) may help prolong life.

DENTAL DISEASE: Prairie dogs are prone to dental problems, in part due to excessive cage bar biting. Tooth trauma and other factors can result in **malocclusion or crooked teeth**, usually involving the front teeth (incisors). Signs include grossly overgrown crooked teeth, difficulty eating, drooling, and oral odor. Treatment is via trimming the overgrown teeth; this may be needed every 3-5 weeks lifelong unless the teeth are extracted.

The other common tooth problem is a tumor growing on the tooth root (**odontoma**), usually involving one or both upper incisors. The tooth develops a bony growth or swelling at the root tip, likely from impact trauma as with cage bar biting. The tooth root is located in the nasal passage, so the tumor slowly blocks air flow, eventually resulting in extreme difficulty breathing. Prairie dogs do not breathe well through the mouth, so a nasal blockage is life threatening. They may choke and inhale food or water, resulting in an aspiration pneumonia which worsens the symptoms. The affected incisor may be worn short (<1cm long) due to lack of normal growth. Diagnosis is via x-rays of the head; treatment is via extraction of the affected tooth or teeth. This is a difficult disease to treat and not all patients survive. Try to avoid this problem by providing a large cage and using soft cardboard or rope toys to minimize biting on metal. (See **Housing**).

RINGWORM (FUNGAL INFECTION): Prairie dogs may get fungal infections of the skin; this can occasionally be transmitted to other pets or humans. Signs include hair loss, and scaly, thickened, or darkened skin on the chest, abdomen, lower back, tail or head. Itching is minimal. Diagnosis is via culturing the hair for fungus. Treatment is via topical and systemic antifungal drugs.

UTERINE INFECTIONS AND CANCER: Uterine disease occurs in middle aged or older females; both infections and cancers may be seen. Signs of uterine disease may be subtle, and include vaginal discharge, odor, weight loss, or lethargy. The best prevention is spaying when young (8-12 months old). This also prevents unwanted pregnancy if a pair is housed together.

ODONTOMAS: These are tumors growing on the tooth roots, usually the upper incisors. They can become quite large and block the nasal passages, making it very difficult to breathe. Though benign, their location can make them life threatening. Signs may include lack of incisor growth (one or both upper incisors becoming very short and worn down), or nasal discharge. Severe cases may have audible wheezing, open-mouth breathing, lethargy and weight loss. Treatment is difficult, but includes antibiotics and surgical removal of the affected tooth roots. If the prairie dog can survive surgery and heal, the tumor can usually be cured.