



## Care of Prairie Dogs

### Ness Exotic Wellness Center

1007 Maple Ave.  
Lisle, IL 60532  
(630) 737-1281



Prairie dogs, typically black-tailed prairie dogs, are occasionally kept as pets. However, they are not suitable pets for most owners as they can become difficult and aggressive if not regularly handled. Prairie dogs are often nippy by nature, so keep this in mind if you have small children. Prairie dogs are also burrowing animals; their housing should allow for this normal behavior, as well as ample space for exercise.

If properly cared for, prairie dogs have a lifespan of about 8-10 years. Like all rodents, they have 4 incisor teeth that continually grow throughout life. Their digestive systems are designed for hindgut fermentation, which requires a large amount of roughage in the diet.

In the wild, prairie dogs spend a lot of time in groups as they are social animals. Unless you can spend a large amount of time with your pet, keeping only 1 prairie dog is not recommended. Males can be housed together if neutered; females can be housed together with or without spaying. If a male is housed with a female, neutering is essential to prevent breeding and unplanned pregnancies. If mated, females usually produce one litter each year after a 35-40 day pregnancy; each litter contains 2-10 pups. Pups are weaned by 7 weeks of age. Puberty is reached at 2-3 years of age. Pregnant and nursing females become aggressive towards other prairie dogs and should be separated from them.

Males are usually larger than females. The average weight of an adult male or female prairie dog ranges from about 1.5 pounds to 3.5 pounds. Obesity is a common problem in pet prairie dogs due to diet and lack of exercise. Properly feeding your pet and allowing for adequate exercise can prevent this problem.

When selecting your pet prairie dog, ideally look for a young pet. Whenever possible, consider adopting your pet from a reputable shelter or rescue group. The eyes and nose should be clear and free of any discharge that might indicate a respiratory infection. The pet should be curious and inquisitive and easily handled; it should not be thin and

emaciated. Check for the presence of wetness around the anus, which might indicate diarrhea. Check for the presence of external parasites such as fleas and ticks. If possible, examine the animal's mouth for broken teeth or any obvious sores, any of which could suggest disease. Inquire as to whether the prairie dog has been surgically altered (spayed or neutered).

### **Housing**

Prairie dogs should be housed in as large a cage as is practical as they require room to move around and explore. Space should be allowed for exercise. They do not need to climb and shelves and other climbing equipment is not recommended. Since prairie dogs love to chew, they should not be housed in wooden cages. Rather, stainless steel cages are preferred. To prevent odor buildup and respiratory disease, at least one (and preferable all) sides of the cage should be open to allow adequate ventilation. Prairie dogs love to dig and burrow and often hide under cage bedding which can be messy as the bedding is flung out of the cage. Preferred bedding includes wood shavings, commercial pellets, or shredded paper. Avoid sand, mud, and cedar wood shavings (cedar might be toxic.) Commercially produced tunnels and boxes allow for exploration by the prairie dog. The floor of the cage can be solid or wire with an under-the-cage pan to allow for bedding and excrement accumulation.

Due to their reputation as curious creatures and escape artists, prairie dogs should be housed in a cage which is securely closed and locked. The cage must be escape-proof. Prairie dogs like to hide. Bedding provides a hiding place and allows for a cleaner cage. Bedding should be changed at least weekly and preferably more often as waste material accumulates. As mentioned, hiding places (nest boxes, tunnels, etc.) mimic the outside environment and let prairie dogs exhibit normal behavior. Toys are not needed. Your prairie dog will appreciate daily exercise. Supervised exercise outside the cage should be encouraged daily.

Preferred temperature for prairie dogs is about 70 degrees F with about 30-70% humidity. Extremes in temperature should be avoided. High temperatures may cause heat stroke, and cold temperatures may cause sluggish behavior (pseudo-hibernation). A stress-free environment is preferred by prairie dogs.

### **Feeding**

Prairie dogs tend to eat grasses, plants, and leaves in the wild. As captive pets, it is essential to feed a diet that approximates what they eat in the wild in order to prevent problems; dietary-related diseases such as obesity, malnutrition, and gastrointestinal disorders are among the more common disorders in prairie dogs and are directly related to an improper diet. Food should always be available for prairie dogs, since they

graze both during the day and night. Fresh water must be available at all times. It is best provided in a sipper bottle, similar to a rabbit water bottle, since it is less messy than a water bowl.

Similar to rabbits, prairie dogs require a diet high in fresh fiber. Feeding hay is essential, mainly timothy or other grass hay, avoiding large amounts of the richer alfalfa hay. Rabbit pellets may be offered in small amounts (about ¼ cup per pet,) decreasing or even eliminating this after 1 year of age. Fresh vegetables should be offered, especially a variety of green leafy vegetables such as parsley, cilantro, carrot tops. Small amounts of various fruits can be offered as a treat. To avoid obesity, dental disease and fatty liver disease, avoid dog and cat food, nuts, raisins, animal protein, additional carbohydrates and table scraps. Treat foods should constitute less than 5% of the diet.

### **Veterinary Exams**

As is true with all pets, prairie dogs require annual veterinary visits. The first evaluation is suggested prior to or immediately following purchase. Vaccines are not needed for pet prairie dogs. A full physical examination is needed for early detection of disease. Certain diagnostic tests that may be recommended include radiographs (X-rays), blood tests, microscopic fecal examination and urinalysis. It is often impossible to perform a complete and thorough physical examination on an awake prairie dog, with the detailed examination and diagnostic testing often done under gas anesthesia. As your pet ages, it is recommended to get an exam twice a year, especially after 5 years of age and older.

Even tame prairie dogs can be difficult to examine during its checkup. As a result, gas anesthesia is often needed. While a concern for owners, anesthesia using isoflurane or a similar gas is typically safe even for sick pets. The chance of death or injury to the pet or staff is much less when anesthesia is used, rather than if the pet becomes stressed and agitated during handling when awake.

### **Common Diseases**

Common conditions in pet prairie dogs include obesity, dental disease, respiratory disease, ringworm and parasites. Other conditions that afflict them as they age include different types of cancer and heart disease. Signs of illness, regardless of the cause, are often non-specific. For this reason, any deviation from normal in your pet should be immediately evaluated by a veterinarian.

**Obesity** results in an overweight prairie dog that may suffer from secondary heart, liver, or pancreatic problems. Obesity results from feeding the wrong diet and from lack

of exercise. Obesity is easily prevented and somewhat difficult to treat as prairie dogs often get “hooked” on the diet which predisposed them to obesity.

**Parasites** may be seen in and on prairie dogs. These include fleas, mites, ticks, and various intestinal parasites. Prairie dogs bred in captivity have fewer parasite problems than wild-caught pets. A thorough veterinary examination, including microscopic analysis of the feces and deworming, is important upon purchase of your new pet. Certain types of fleas can carry plague, therefore prairie dogs should be checked and treated for fleas when purchased.

**Dental disease** can occur from overgrown teeth or malocclusion of the teeth. Damage to the teeth can result from trauma, chewing on the cage, or feeding the improper diet. Signs of dental disease can include decreased appetite, weight loss, and excessive salivation from the mouth. Treatment usually necessitates trimming of the teeth under anesthesia. Although this is usually curative at the time, the problem may recur.

**Odontomas** are proliferative swellings at the roots of the prairie dog’s upper incisors. These are tumor-like growths that affect the proper growth of their teeth as well as narrow the sinus passages. As a result it can severely affect breathing. This is a serious disease that may be managed if caught early, but often becomes fatal as it progresses.

**Respiratory disease** may result from bacteria, fungi, viruses, and tumors in the sinus and lungs. Diagnosis is through radiography, ultrasonography, and cultures of the respiratory system as indicated. Treatment depends upon the cause, but the prognosis is always guarded as many of these cases are diagnosed later in the course of disease.

**Cardiac disease** is also seen in prairie dogs. Dilated cardiomyopathy occurs in prairie dogs, which is a heart disease also seen in people and certain types of pets. Clinical signs include difficulty breathing, weight loss, and lack of appetite. Diagnosis is the same as for respiratory disease. Treatment using cardiac medications can be attempted. As with respiratory disease, the prognosis is always guarded as many of these cases are diagnosed later in the course of the disease.

**Monkey pox** was been reported in some prairie dogs in 2003. It was spread to the prairie dogs from Gambian rats in a pet dealer facility. Symptoms of infection include skin lesions, fever, enlarged lymph nodes and discharges from eyes and nose. This is a serious disease that is transmissible to people. As a result, strict quarantine and the suspension of the sale of prairie dogs was imposed at the time.

**Signs of disease** in prairie dogs may be specific for a certain disease. Most commonly, however, signs are vague and non-specific, such as a prairie dog with anorexia (lack of appetite) and lethargy, which can be seen with many diseases. As mentioned, any deviation from normal should be a cause for concern and requires immediate evaluation by your veterinarian. Sometimes the history and physical examination give the doctor a clue as to the possible problem, such as obesity or dental disease. Often diagnostic testing may be indicated, including fecal examination, blood tests, cultures and radiographs. In cases involving lumps or bumps, aspiration of the lesion may be necessary to evaluate abscesses and cancers. Due to the nature of prairie dogs, most testing is done under gas anesthesia.

**Treatment of diseases** depends on the underlying cause and severity of the problem. Diseases related to diet are treated with dietary correction. Truly sick pets may require hospitalization with specific medications, force feeding and fluid administration. Prognosis may be very guarded in these patients. Bacterial and parasitic diseases are treated with the appropriate medical therapy. Prairie dogs with serious disorders of the internal organs are treated with medications and supportive therapy if indicated.

