



Milwood Animal Clinic

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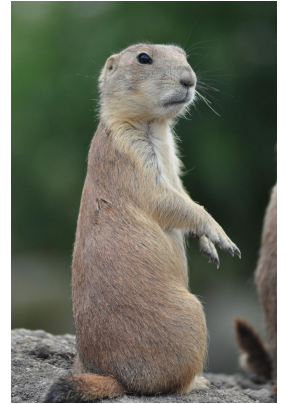
www.MilwoodAnimalClinic.com

Prairie Dog Care

Natural History & Basic Facts

Prairie dogs are rodents that are native to the grasslands of North America. There are multiple species, but the most common is the black-tail prairie dog. They received their name due to where their habitat primarily is and the "barking" sound they make when making a warning call. One of the first descriptions of a prairie dog is from Lewis and Clark's expedition, where they encounter a grouping of prairie dogs.

In terms of body, these rodents are quite stout and small. Prairie dogs are generally only 1-3 pounds in body weight, with their height normally limited to 16 inches. There isn't much sexual dimorphism between males and females (at least with the black tail, there is more with the white tail).



Their lifespan can be tricky to determine. In the wild, prairie dogs don't generally live longer than 3 years, but their mortality is due to wild causes. Some estimate the more commonly accepted life span is 5 years for a male and 7 years for a female.

Prior to purchasing a prairie dog, check your state and local jurisdiction for legality of this animal.

Prairie Dogs as Pets

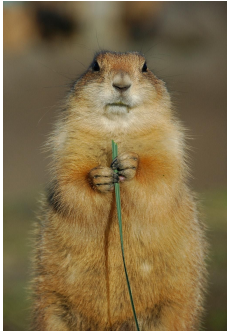
Prairie dogs are wild animals and at most can only be tamed. In some areas within the United States, they are considered vermin that can carry diseases and fleas. However, that doesn't dissipate their popularity in the exotic pet trade, and they have become more prominent in recent years.

Overall, prairie dogs are highly intelligent and destructive rodents. They don't tolerate handling well, and have a wicked bite. However, those that have been handled early in life can tolerate handling. They are considered a more advanced species for ownership due to their care and aggressive tendencies.

Due to their highly social nature, they need constant attention and really do best if housed with other prairie dogs. Being left alone for long periods of time can lead to depression and aggression. While they are not dogs, they can be harness-trained (specific harnesses made for them) and learn to come when called.

Diet

Similar to many other rodents, their teeth are constantly growing. Thus, they need a healthy diet of grasses and roughage to keep their teeth maintained. If not, they may need dental care by a veterinarian.



Appropriate roughage include hay, grasses, roots, prickly pear. Due to its high amount of calcium, alfalfa is NOT recommended. Vegetables should also be offered consistently. See list below, for nutritious leafy greens to offer.

It is important to not overfeed a prairie dog as these guys are prone to obesity. Small amounts of rodent lab block diet can be offered in younger Prairie dogs (1-2 blocks per week), but this should be slowly be eliminated by 1 year of age. Hay should always be available for them to eat.

Nutritious Dark Leafy Greens

Feed the following greens in abundance:

Arugula
Basil
Cilantro
Clover (no pesticides or herbicides)
Dill leaves
Endive*
Escarole
Mint
Peppermint leaves
Radicchio
Raspberry leaves
Red or Green Leaf Lettuce
Romaine lettuce (no iceberg or light colored leaf lettuce)*
Dandelion greens and flowers (no pesticides or herbicides)*
Watercress*
Wheat grass

The following greens should be fed less often and in smaller amounts:

Alfalfa, radish & clover sprouts^
Beet greens (tops)^*
Bok Choy†
Brussels sprouts^†
Carrot tops^*
Collard greens†^*
Kale†*
Mustard greens†^*
Parsley^*
Radish tops^
Swiss Chard^
Spinach †^*
Turnip Greens†^

* Contains high amounts of Vitamin A, which is good for skin health

^ Contains high amounts of oxalates & may cause health problems if fed often. Use sparingly.

† Contains high amounts of goitrogens & may cause health problems if fed often. Use sparingly.

Water

Water should always be available in the cage/habitat, and the easiest way to provide water is with a water bottle/sipper. Always check the sipper bottle daily to make sure it is not clogged by

food. Some prairie dogs drink better from a water bowl but it should be a very heavy crock to avoid it being knocked over.

Housing & Enrichment

It can be difficult to mimic the perfect environment for an adult prairie dog. They love to dig, and as adults can burrow excessively deep. Thus, it can be difficult to house them indoors, and they actually tolerate a wide range of temperatures outside given they have a good burrow to hide in. However, this can still be difficult to construct as they can burrow and escape.

The best indoor cage for a prairie dog is a multi-level cage (to simulate burrowing) with enough height for them to easily stand and move between levels. Bedding can be used, such as Care Fresh (cedar is very irritating, sawdust is very irritating, and the soft cotton bedding can be ingested, so do not use these). Ample bedding should be used in a nesting area to allow for burrowing.

An aquarium is NOT appropriate, and wire bottom cages can risk trauma to the feet. Solid bottom cages are recommended.

Burrowing and social interaction is necessary for a happy prairie dog. Giving them enough material to burrow is incredibly important. Interacting consistently with your animal or having at least a pair of prairie dogs is important. Multiple animals of the same sex can easily be housed together as can male-female combinations, but be cautious regarding reproduction. Multiple males can fight so neutering is recommended.

Common Health Issues

Prairie dogs are known to become aggressive, thus neutering is highly recommended. Sexual maturity in a prairie dog is generally reached by 2-3 years, but neutering is recommended prior to 1 year of age. Unlike other animals, this does require an incision into the abdomen, and due to changes in weight/fat storage, this is best performed between May and October. Spaying a prairie dog is possible and should be done similar to males as it becomes very difficult as they age and gain weight.

Obesity is a common issue with prairie dogs as they love to eat! Weight gain is expected in the winter time, as they do not hibernate but are less active (they can experience "hibernation-like" states in temperatures less than 55 degrees F). Prairie dogs should lose the additional weight by spring, and if not, dieting should be discussed with your veterinarian.

Dental disease is also common. Due to their teeth ever-growing, they may require dental work to ensure a healthy oral cavity. Dental issues can also lead to respiratory issues - something else common in prairie dogs. Oral trauma has also been linked to an "oral-like" mass that can grow into the nose and eventually be fatal (odontoma) due to prairie dogs being obligate nasal breathers (can only breathe through their nose).

In general, a veterinary visit should be performed once a year with an annual fecal examination to check for parasites. However, sedation is often required for visits.

