

Prairie Dogs

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There are five species of prairie dogs. Two species are endangered and protected, being the Mexican prairie dog (*C. mexicanus*) and the Utahprairie dog (*C. parvidens*). The species most commonly found in captivity is the black-tailed prairie dog (*C. ludovicianus*). Most prairie dogs kept as pets come from the wild population in the western United States. Since these are native animals, they are illegal to keep as pets in certain states. Prairie dogs have different characteristics from other pet rodents. They tend to be more difficult to handle and provide for. Prairie dogs are colony oriented burrowing rodents, requiring special provisions for social interactions and burrowing behavior. It is inappropriate to keep them as solitary animals in a small cage as traditionally done for other pet rodents.

Living Conditions

Prairie dogs can be housed in a variety of cage environments. The minimum dimensions of 24" wide by 24" deep by 30" high can be met with a standard rabbit cage, but larger is better. The cage should be constructed from heavy gauge wire mesh or stainless steel for good ventilation and resistance to gnawing. A shelf or platform is important for the prairie dog to perch upon and hide beneath. Cage furnishings can include tubes to climb through, chew toys and a nesting box for privacy. A solid bottom floor with several inches of bedding material allows for the natural desire to burrow and dig. Appropriate substrates include pelleted paper or grass fiber products and shredded paper. Materials to avoid include cedar shavings and clay cat litter. The cage should be placed in a cool, dry location with good ventilation. Ambient temperatures of 65° to 80°F and 40% to 60% relative humidity are suitable. Companionship is important due to their social nature, therefore housing with other prairie dogs or at least regular daily human interaction is necessary.

Nutrition

The natural diet of the prairie dog consists primarily of grasses, roots and some insects, therefore the diet fed in captivity should reflect this. Unlimited hay and ample greens or leafy vegetables constitute the majority of the diet. Rabbit pellets or rodent blocks are offered in the limited proportion of approximately one-half to one ounce daily. Occasional supplementation of seed, nuts, cereals and fruit serve as treats and rewards during training. Keep these and other fatty foods to a minimum to reduce the risk of obesity in the prairie dog, which is one of the most common problems seen in practice. These animals are herbivorous rodents and not omnivorous dogs, so dog food is not recommended. Clean, fresh water can be provided in a standard guinea pig or rabbit water bottle.