

# ***Caring For Your Pet Prairie Dog***

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**The Nature Of The Beast:** Prairie dogs are highly social animals, which means that they MUST have frequent interaction with their 'family'. It is humbling when you add a prairie dog to your life, because YOU become its 'family' and replace the one they would have had in the wild. They can be demanding at times, and require a lot of attention, interaction and commitment. This 'communal nature' dictates that they will most likely limit their affection and trust only to the people and animals that share your home. Early and frequent socialization with outsiders may, in some instances, alter the tendency to be protective. Typically prairie dogs are not a pet you can share with others, and not every prairie dog wants to be a 'pet'.

Each prairie dog is unique in their reactions to environmental stimuli and can vary as greatly as human reactions. Your prairie dog may naturally want to protect the home and family from "intruders" (anyone not living in the home). In the wild, they assigned "duties" and when they live in our home, we must respect and understand that they take their job very seriously. In many cases, once they have reached adulthood, they may develop territorial behaviors and become aggressive toward company. It is up to us to protect them and our visitors by keeping them apart.

These important issues need to be taken into consideration when thinking about making a prairie dog part of your family.

**Considerations When Out Of the Cage:** Please supervise your pet carefully any time they are out of their cage to avoid injury or possibly death, as well as destruction to items in your home. They will not hesitate to chew up (or dig in) furniture or carpets. A human home is dangerous to a prairie dog without constant supervision. Electrical cords, fans, including under refrigerators, window or door screens, regular household chemicals, certain human foods, poisons, paint or stain fumes, and other family pets are just some possible hazards. Furthermore, prairie dogs did not evolve to 'climb' and do not see forward as we do. They see from a side view, and consequently have no depth perception, appear to be fearless of heights, and lack the proper claws for gripping. You must not allow your

prairie dog to climb because a fall can cause serious injuries that can be fatal. Odontoma can develop as a result of tooth trauma from a fall, or from plucking at the cage wire.

Special Health Issues: Prairie dog's toenails need to be trimmed. Clipping the very tip is all that is required. It is a good idea to keep styptic powder on hand in case a nail gets clipped too short. A quick dab of the powder instantly stops bleeding. Prairie dogs front teeth (incisors) continue to grow throughout their lives. You will need to make provisions by including proper gnawing materials so that their teeth wear down naturally, otherwise, serious medical problems may occur.

Prairie dogs are prone to respiratory disease, which may be a result of, or exacerbated by, inappropriate humidity levels, dust and/or lint, soiled bedding (and high ammonia levels), incisor teeth abnormalities or infectious disease. Clean, controlled air (temperature and humidity levels) in the home is imperative for good health. It is important that your home be free of smoke, aerosols, perfume or paint fumes as well. Please see your Vet immediately if your prairie dog exhibits upper respiratory symptoms.

**Housing:** Your prairie dog's cage should be large enough to allow room to play, an untreated wood box or metal nesting box for sleeping and a litter box filled with 2" of newspaper pellets or aspen shavings. Lining a drop pan with plain old newspaper is best and easy to clean up daily. Use baby receiving blankets for bedding and keep extras on hand for changing bedding. An appropriate cage is at least 24"x24"x36" and if there are floors, they must be FULL FLOORS with no wire ramps because they can catch little prairie dog toenails and rip them off. For floors, strong wire should be used with spacing no more than one half inch by one half inch. A pan that catches droppings under the cage will help in cleaning. Prairie dogs like to dig, so a sandbox with play sand or a box full of shredded computer paper are ideal fun for your pet. Add a cinder block, brick or rough rock to aid in natural wearing of nails. Prairie dogs appreciate tunnels for exploring, and lots of hay for burrowing. A rope dog chew or parrot toys made with rope and wood make excellent toys for chewing needs. In all instances wood must be untreated. Grass and hay can be piled deep in the cage for bedding or nesting, but cleaned often because soiled hay can grow mold rapidly. They love to play, sleep and nest in it, and it is safe and healthy to eat! Avoid cedar, aromatic pine and certain other wood shavings, because they may contain resins that can be irritating to your prairie dog's skin, eyes, and mucous membranes.

Avoid placing the cage in an area that has direct sun contact at any time of the day or may be in the path of any flow of air from heater or air conditioner vents. The cage should be situated in an area that has normal flow of traffic so they feel like they are part of the family and not isolated.

**Nutritional Needs:** The main staple in their diet should be unlimited quantities of grass, and hay such as timothy, oat, orchard, or brome. The chewing action when consuming hay aids in the normal wear of teeth and provides the essential fiber needed to maintain intestinal health. There is a wide variety of vegetables and other items that can be added to their diet in moderation. Oxbow sells Bunny Basic "T" (timothy) pellets which can be fed free choice along with the hay. Offer a tablespoon of Quaker Old Fashioned oats daily. A tablespoon of Healthy Handfuls made by Oxbow is another healthy food made of barley that can be offered every other day. Brisky Pet Products in New York offers Prairie Pride, a nutritional pelleted supplemental feed made with timothy hay.

Fresh, clean water is a must for your prairie dog in a water bottle with a sipper tube. Water needs to

be changed daily, and the sipper tube should be cleaned weekly. Remember that hay dust turns to pollen, resulting in algae in water bottles; never let algae build up in the water bottle.

**Treats and Gnawing Items:** Timothy hay cubes, CERTAIN dried or fresh herbs, leafy greens, some vegetables, raw or rolled oats and Nature's Recipe Allergy Vegetarian dog food nuggets can be offered to your prairie dog in moderation. In order to prevent digestive upset, feed the same treats consistently, and avoid gas-forming vegetables such as broccoli or cauliflower. Chemical free branches and leaves from maple, willow, thornless rose, mulberry, etc. are not only safe, but aid in necessary tooth wear and to satisfy gnawing needs. Never give your prairie dog dried corn or alfalfa.

**Vet Care:** Spaying/Neutering Choosing a proper Vet is very important. A Vet should be selected by either their experience with prairie dogs or at least be willing to consult with a vet more experienced with this species. A fecal flotation and smear are generally recommended to check for intestinal parasites during your initial visit to your Vet or anytime your pet comes in contact with the earth.

Altering your male is recommended. In order to ease the symptoms of seasonal aggressive behavior that accompanies the onset of mating season, it is best to neuter a male prairie dog during the Fall of their first year or the following Spring. If you wait longer, the prairie dog may develop undesirable and ingrained territorial and hormone driven HABITS that could be curbed or eliminated by neutering prior to sexual maturity. The spay surgery for females is completely optional. There is no known link to cancer in females left intact. When you schedule the appointment for the surgery, it is recommended that ask for a baseline DIGITAL radiograph of the sinus area while your PD is under anesthesia in the event of an injury to the teeth at a later date for comparison.

**IMPORTANT:** This is only an outline of what a prairie dog pet owner needs to know. Please consult with your Veterinarian should your pet need medical attention. We have an invitation only email list [below] online for prairie dog pet owners, and other interested individuals for the sharing of information. Prairie Dog Lovers Forum is a place where long lasting friendships develop, and where we all know... "there is no love in all the world, like the love of a prairie dog."

A Prairie Dog Lover's Burrow - The Plight of the Prairie Dog - As pets and in the wild. - link:  
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