

What constitutes a healthy diet for captive prairie dogs?

A daily adult captive diet should consist of 98% timothy or other grass hay, and 2% treats. Adult prairie dogs should be offered unlimited amounts of fresh timothy hay or other grass hay daily. Other grass hays include: oat, meadow grass, brome, and orchard grass to name a few. **DO NOT FEED ALFALFA** (unless for protein, see below), a legume hay which contains too high of calcium protein content. Prairie dogs are selectively herbivorous which means that they will only consume the nutritionally viable portion of a strand of grass or hay and may not eat all you provide in its entirety, therefore you should anticipate hay waste. Each day, remove uneaten and/or soiled hay and replace with a fresh supply to encourage your prairie dog's continual interest in foraging and eating. Hide treats within hay as a form of enrichment activity. Store hay in a dry environment away from potential pests where it is allowed to breathe. Some people store hay in large plastic Rubbermaid trash cans in their garage with vent holes poked in the lid. Check routinely for mold in your hay because it is deadly if ingested by your pet.

Dietary intake of the prairie dog consists of three essential categories: hay, treats (all items that are not hay), and protein. Hay should be fed as described above. Treats are any and all other food or supplements that are not hay or considered a protein source. Treats should be limited to the following serving size recommendations:

When fed timothy hay based pellets as a daily nutritional supplement or treat for thriving, mature prairie dogs 6 months in age and older which weigh 2 lb (907 g) or more, feed 1/8 cup or 24 grams. Make sure that any pellets you use DO NOT contain alfalfa or dried corn. Feed this amount only if the timothy based pellet is used as a SINGLE treat combined with fresh grasses and hays.

*For pups less than 6 months in age and under the adult weight above, feed 1/4 cup or 48 grams of grass based pellets. Feed this amount only if the timothy based pellet is used as a SINGLE treat combined with fresh grasses and hays.

If feeding an additional treat or supplemental food such as fresh vegetables, feed lesser amounts of timothy hay based pellets so that they only are getting 1/8 cup (24g) or 1/4 cup (48g) in maximum treat allotment amount per day. Consider hiding all treats within fresh hay and grasses to serve as an enrichment activity to the prairie dog.

Prairie dogs also need varying protein amounts based on age, weight, and stage of development. Recommended protein rations are as follows (CHOOSE FROM ONLY ONE SOURCE):

Adults (under 907g/2lbs): half a teaspoon of whole dried mealworms or about 8-10 a week. For prairie dogs over 2.5lbs/1134g, give only 4-6 mealworms a week.

*Pups: a half-tablespoon of dried mealworms a day. If you are using powder mealworms, provide a teaspoon of powder a day. Slow down the ration as your prairie dog reaches 6 months or 907 grams or two pounds.

If you are unable to feed mealworms, you can use a high quality vegetarian dog kibble (Nature's Recipe Healthy Skin & Coat Vegetarian Recipe by Del Monte is a good choice as it does NOT contain dried corn which is harmful to gall bladder). For pups that are under six months in age or 907g, feed 1 teaspoon to 1 rounded tablespoon per day. Feed closer to 1 teaspoon if your prairie dog is thriving on the dietary recommendations above and getting close to adult size. For an adult over 907g in weight, feed only two pieces of the kibble per week in total. In lieu of this, other protein sources for pups would include 1/4 cup alfalfa hay, or 1/4 tsp. crickets (dead or alive, depending on your pet's preference) but ONLY IF you cannot acquire the dog kibble OR dried mealworms that are referenced first.

An ideal weight for a captive adult prairie dog that is not "working" in the same manner as their wild counterparts is from 2 1/4 - 2 1/2 lbs or 1021-1134g range for females, and 2 1/4 - 2 3/4 lbs or 1021-1247g range in males. Do your best that they don't exceed the top of this range. If an adolescent or adult prairie dog exceeds 907g, decrease the protein SLOWLY over the course of several weeks, until they meet the adult serving recommendation above. **Adults should remain on one or two pieces of dried kibble per week or the recommended mealworm ration above until they reach geriatric age** and then further consultation will be needed to assess your particular pet's needs. Geriatric age varies from animal to animal, but typically starts around 6-8. Call if you think your pet needs to be put on a geriatric diet regime.

If you are capable of providing fresh grasses, it is highly recommended. However, four notes of caution about use of fresh grasses, including dandelion greens. One, be **absolutely sure** they are free of pesticides and fertilizers, as they can spread from a neighbor's lawn by wind and rain, not only your own. You also should be aware that they may contain some form of bacteria or parasite from the waste of a sick animal that you cannot see. Two, be careful of what flowers or other vegetation you offer because some plants can be toxic to your prairie dog. Third, it is difficult to assure that grasses have not been compromised from parasites or bacteria from other animals that may eliminate their waste and you can't always see what is on the grass you are providing. Fourth, adequate hydration can be an issue for your pet if you are unable to provide fresh grasses year round as they will often substitute fresh grass intake instead of drinking from their water bottle. Limit fresh grass intake to less than 5% of the serving amount of hay you feed per day while continuing to provide plenty of hay to encourage your prairie dog to continue to drink from its water bottle as usual when fresh grasses are not available. Lastly, excessive use of some fresh grasses at particular growing times can be too rich and high in nitrate,

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nitrite, oxalates value which can build over time to toxic levels in the prairie dog's renal system. These compounds are not easily excreted, so be sure serve a limited amounts of grass as noted above to avoid these high concentrations.

Treats consist of limited amounts of various vegetables and some supplemental timothy or grass hay based pellets and/or cubes. Any pelleted type of feed developed with prairie dogs in mind is suitable as a treat but should **never** be considered a complete diet regardless of its grass content. Always remember that pet food companies are trying to sell their products and do not solely specialize in one species and are not necessarily concerned about the long term welfare of your pet, they want you to buy many pets and keep buying pellets. Pelleted feeds **do not** enable a prairie dog to replicate the type of chewing action that is important for proper overall tooth wear and maintenance over time because they chew grasses and hays differently than they do pellet feed which is comparable to humans eating processed foods. Even tooth wear from hay or grass is essential in tooth maintenance in order to avoid the possibility of odontoma, malocclusion, or other dental conditions over the course of their lifespan. Silicates from dust and dirt on hay and grass provide overall dental abrasion in a similar manner as toothpaste with humans and aid in the long term dental health in your pet. All pellets you consider purchasing should list timothy hay or another grass hay (not alfalfa) as their first ingredient for best results over time and improved longevity.

Suggested vegetable treats include and are not limited to baby carrots, sweet potato, yam, zucchini, and romaine lettuce. Root based vegetables replicate tubers they dig and eat in the wild along with other forbs and herbs. Some vegetables to stay away from include died corn (small pieces of fresh can be given a couple times a year as a very special treat), spinach (it interferes with calcium absorption), and iceberg lettuce. Be smart and only feed treats in quantities that make sense for your animal's size. Providing an entire leaf of romaine lettuce can be the equivalent to a human eating an entire head of lettuce. The results of that could be disastrous! Some people have noted that broccoli can cause gas in their prairie dog. I've never known that to be the case if feeding in small quantities, again, this is a treat, not a meal!

Do not feed seeds and nuts because their fat and oil content are too high for your pet's long term health unless they are given as a very rare treat such as special occasions or major holidays, 3-4 times per year. Prairie dogs that are given seeds and nuts often as treats may not suffer initially, but long term many report fatty, sebaceous cysts and other health matters from trying to process too much oil that is not natural to their diet.

Do not provide branches, wood, or plastic items for chewing to wear down their teeth. Proper tooth abrasion and even wear throughout the mouth can only occur with a plentiful diet of hays and grasses that wear the entire mouth. Prairie dogs have suffered dental abscesses, splintered wood fibers imbedded in the gut lining, and other long term health complications from chewing wood and other materials in the name of tooth maintenance. Respiratory concerns also arise because you cannot get urine and other matter removed from wood safely.

Once a consistent diet has been established with your pet, try to stick to it. Their digestive tract can be sensitive to a highly varied and inconsistent routine over time. If you must make dietary modifications due to weight, or for any other reason, do so slowly over the course of many weeks, supplementing a few pieces of the new food in every few days while removing the unwanted item gradually so you don't shock their system. Overnight changes can be disastrous.

If you stop and consider where a prairie dog comes from and the competition it gets in the wild for food, you will understand the importance of not over indulging this highly efficient animal with treats and will do your best in following the ratio noted above.

***SPECIAL NOTE ABOUT PUPS:** Developing pups have a higher protein and treat maximum intake allotment that dramatically drops off when prairie dogs reach the mature adult weight threshold of 2 lbs or 907g. Please understand that all pups will initially only be able to consume minimal levels of hay, treats, and protein as noted above as their digestive tract transitions from nursing to eating solids. This means that they will NOT start out eating the maximum treat and protein ration above but will gradually grow and increase intake over time not to exceed what is outlined here. The key is that you pup gets unlimited fresh hay that is replaced daily and that you incrementally increase treats as they are able to manage them based on their size and stage of development. Do not push milk formula feedings if your pup is eating solids well as they progressively become lactose intolerant and you can cause serious health problems to their digestive tract if you push formula longer than necessary. They are often weaned between 8-10 weeks although some very small pups may need formula until they reach 12 weeks but this isn't common. Please contact me to help assess case-by-case if you are unsure whether to continue with formula in these situations. Caretakers should ensure that consistent growth is taking place over time and note that the majority of pups reach full size at around six months in age, but not all will do so. What is important to monitor is that the pup is gaining weight and growing but not losing weight or regressing over time. What is outlined above is the maximum guidelines for what adults and pups need for long term health. If you maintain the weight thresholds mentioned above, it will cause less stress on their skeletal structure as they hit geriatric phases of life because those that weigh significantly over these thresholds often suffer a host of health issues that shorten lifespan including: arthritis, congestive heart failure, diabetic/hypoglycemic symptoms, and much more. Since captive prairie dogs don't work in the same manner as their wild counterparts to account for the surplus nutrition that they'd never encounter in their wild habitat, please keep your feeding conservative and respect the wild nature of this species.