

A Tale Of Two Prairie Dogs

Meet two prairie dogs: One battles a mite infestation while the other won't allow a surgical incision to heal.

By Jerry Murray, DVM

Posted: May 19, 2010, 5 a.m. EDT

[Click image to enlarge](#)

A makeshift "body cast" was used to prevent this prairie dog from chewing on the site of his surgical incision.

Photos Courtesy of Jerry Murray, DVM

This prairie dog now lives at the clinic. He's quite friendly, but he has a bit of a musky aroma.

Pet prairie dog sales were banned by the Centers for Disease Control in 2003 because of an outbreak of monkeypox, but they are making a comeback as a small mammal pet in some areas because the ban by the CDC was lifted in 2008.

Prairie dogs are actually ground squirrels and not dogs. There are five species of prairie dogs, but just about all pet prairie dogs are black-tailed prairie dogs. Black-tailed prairie dogs live in the wild from southern Saskatchewan, Canada, all the way down to northern Mexico. To my knowledge, pet prairie dogs are usually captured from the wild in west Texas and west Kansas. I recently had two prairie dog cases at the clinic.

The first case was a prairie dog that had been rescued from a wholesaler called U.S. Global Exotics. Reportedly more than 26,000 animals were rescued from this north Texas wholesaler because the animals were allegedly kept in inhumane conditions. The animals were turned over to the SPCA of Texas and Wild Rescue of Lewisville, Texas. This prairie dog had a skin condition with patches of thin hair. Prairie dogs in the wild are prone to flea and tick infestations, but no fleas or ticks were seen on this little guy. Captive prairie dogs may also be exposed to skin (sarcoptic) mites from other animals. A skin scrape was done to look for mites, and, surprisingly, demodex mites were found. It is likely the demodex mites were secondary to the bad husbandry at the wholesale facility which resulted in immune suppression.

The second case was a prairie dog that was adopted by one of the receptionists at our veterinary clinic. He was a young intact male that needed to be neutered. The surgery went just fine, but afterward he chewed open his incision line. He was sedated, and the incision line was closed with skin staples. He proceeded to chew out the staples. He was sedated again and a "body cast" was applied to prevent him from chewing on his incision line. Finally his incision healed just fine; however, he has somehow become a permanent resident at the clinic. This prairie dog has quite the friendly personality, but he also has quite the musky body odor.

Two more things to remember about wild-caught prairie dogs: fleas from prairie dogs can carry *Yersinia pestis*, which is the bacterium that causes plague, and *Francisella tularensis*, which is the bacterium that causes tularemia. Thus it is imperative to treat prairie dogs for fleas (and ticks) to prevent any disease from spreading to humans.

[See all of Dr. Murray's columns>>](#)