

MEERKAT CARE

Meerkats are small carnivores originating from southern Africa where they live a strictly diurnal lifestyle, foraging in the day and sheltering in extensive burrow systems at night. They have a complex social structure working together to provide look-outs for predators, forage for food and care for the young within a group. Colonies may include up to 40 individuals usually with one dominant breeding pair and their offspring. They are a complex and challenging species to keep in captivity.

Longevity: 5 – 15 years in captivity

Sociability: Meerkats are a highly social species and must be kept in pairs or groups.

Environment:

- Enclosures should be as spacious as possible and provide a suitable substrate for digging and creation of a burrow system.
- Multiple hide areas and tunnels should also be placed as bolt-holes, as these animals can be very nervous. They are however, also highly curious animals, so should be provided with environmental enrichment by hiding food in pine cones, toilet rolls or treat balls, burying insects in a sand box, providing mazes of cardboard boxes, or introducing other unfamiliar objects which can be investigated.
- Ideally an enclosure should have both indoor and outdoor areas, with indoor temperatures maintained > 20°C to reflect their warmer natural environment.
- Heat and UV lighting may need to be provided in the UK to emulate their natural environment. Humidity needs to be very low to avoid health risks
- Enclosures should be cleaned regularly and disinfected with a suitable pet disinfectant product.

Diet:

Meerkats are mainly insectivorous in the wild, as well as taking the occasional reptile or bird.

- In captivity, usual recommendations are for a balanced insectivore food to make up the majority of the diet. Alternatively low-fat cat food may be fed, but care must be taken to avoid obesity and associated disorders, resulting from higher calorie foods.
- A variety of gut-loaded live insects should also be offered with additional calcium supplementation applied to any insects given.
- Fresh water should always be freely available in a shallow bowl and changed daily.

Preventative healthcare

Annual health checks are recommended for meerkats. Routine examinations may detect subclinical conditions such as dental or cardiac disease.

- Regular weight checks are particularly important as weight changes may be difficult for an owner to detect due to the non-tactile nature of these animals.
- Routine parasite treatment is not generally necessary.
- Vaccination for canine distemper may be considered in animals with outdoor access. In certain zoo situations, vaccination for parvovirus, feline panleucopenia and leptospirosis have also been performed if judged to be a high-risk situation.
- Vasectomy or castration of males is advised in a group situation to prevent breeding. Vasectomy may be preferred to avoid disturbing the social structure of the group.
- Ovariohysterectomy of females can also be performed, but is a more invasive procedure, and due to the low incidence of female reproductive disease, not usually recommended as a contraceptive technique

Insurance:

We highly recommend that you take out a pet insurance policy. For a monthly fee your pet can receive the best treatment at an affordable cost. There is normally an excess to pay for each condition then after that costs are covered up to a set limit. Once you have the policy, please provide us with a copy of your insurance details. There are a lot of different companies and policies available and we suggest you contact a number of them for information- we have a leaflet advising what to look out for. Our advice is to choose a policy which provides cover for chronic illness for the life of your pet. If this policy is too much for you then the best cover you can afford will provide piece of mind in an accident or emergency.

Common health complaints

- Behavioural issues - ill health, boredom, lack of space and sexual maturity can all lead to behaviours such as destruction, escape attempts and aggression. A lot of effort needs to be put into enriching their environment to reduce this risk. Meerkats are not a domesticated species and although they can be friendly when young, this may change as they reach sexual maturity.
- Aggression towards other members of the group is not uncommon – especially if one member is removed for any reason – serious injury and even death can occur on reintroduction. Where possible keep members together or remove in pairs and distract the group with food on reintroduction.
- Foreign body ingestion – intestinal blockages can be caused by inadvertently eating objects used for enrichment
- Trauma due to accidents or aggression
- Metabolic bone disease due to a lack of appropriate diet and sunlight



