

Bear Nutrition and Winter Lethargy

Proper nutrition is key in maintaining bear health. Formulating diets with a veterinarian familiar with bears or a zoo nutritional consultant will help to ensure proper nutrition.



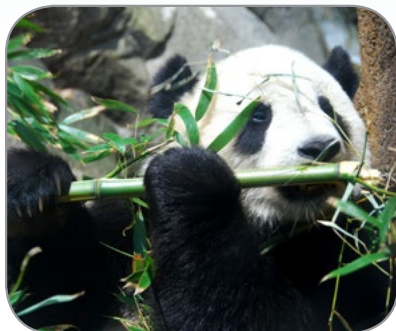
WHAT DO CAPTIVE BEARS EAT?

For most species, a commercial carnivore or omnivore-based diet or a high-quality dog food—along with varying amounts of produce, browse, nuts, and seeds—will give captive bears the nutrients they need. Polar bears will naturally eat more meat and fish than other species of bears.



DID YOU KNOW?

Contact with infected pork or pig products has caused pseudorabies in brown and black bears. To prevent this disease, know the source of all pork-related products because feral swine are known to carry this disease.



Wild Andean (spectacled) bears eat mainly leaves and vegetation, while wild giant pandas eat bamboo. Both species can eat a more varied diet in captivity, but it is best to avoid feeding them high-sugar, high-starch diets because it can lead to obesity.

FORAGING FOR FOOD

Creating situations where bears “work” for their food supports an important natural behavior as wild bears spend the majority of their time foraging for food and this drive remains in captive bears. Combining food with activity is a great way to encourage this behavior. For example:

- scatter food
- plant berry bushes/tress
- hide food in logs or enrichment devices
- offer browse
- freeze healthy treats in ice



SEASONAL DIETS



Most black, brown, and polar bears eat more food and store body fat in the fall. Then, in winter, they eat less as their physical activity declines. You can support this seasonal pattern by allowing bears to eat as much as they wish in the fall and offering them more fatty foods.

WINTER LETHARGY

Captive bears do not truly hibernate. They may enter periods of deep sleep (often called winter lethargy), but many bears will wake often and require food and water.

Whether a bear will retreat into his or her den for deep winter sleep depends on each bear’s individual physiologic state. Not all bears will demonstrate this behavior, even bears of the same species under identical conditions.

Confining bears to their dens does not induce deep winter sleep, and confining them without access to food and water or frequent observation will put bears at risk for dehydration, malnutrition, and death.

This Animal Care Aid is part of a series developed to provide information about bear health and care. Refer to the other topics covered in the series for more information on bear care.

Questions? Email us at CenterforAnimalWelfare@usda.gov

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