



RATTLESNAKE BITES or ENVENOMATION

It has been estimated that 15,000 animals are bitten by snakes annually in the United States. Rattlesnakes are responsible for 80% of all deaths caused by snakebites in animals.

What Are the Symptoms of a Snakebite?

In most cases of rattlesnake envenomation, the signs will appear within one hour after the bite. The signs include pain at the site of the bite, swelling, bruising, and a dark bloody fluid oozing from one or two puncture wounds.

Rattlesnake bites to the head or neck may cause a serious swelling around the trachea or “windpipe” (the upper airway in the neck) which could result in trouble breathing.

Other immediate problems caused by rattlesnake envenomation include heart problems, fluid accumulation in the lungs, excessive salivation and shock. Later in the course of the poisoning, bleeding problems, seizures, severe infections, kidney failure, and death may occur. Not every animal will suffer a severe reaction to a rattlesnake bite. However, it is in the animal’s best interest to have it examined by a veterinarian as soon as possible.

Even a mild reaction to a snakebite, without any injection of poison by the snake, should be treated with antibiotics. The mouth of rattlesnakes is contaminated with a wide variety of bacteria that can cause a serious and potentially fatal infection if not treated.

Treatment

Emergency treatment of the snakebite victim includes intravenous fluid therapy to treat shock and to improve blood flow throughout the body and especially the kidneys. Antibiotics are administered to decrease the severity of an infection. Pain medications may be given as rattlesnake bites cause severe pain which in itself can lead to shock. Antivenin is recommended for most snakebite victims. Antivenin is useful in neutralizing the effects of the rattlesnake venom.

Antivenin helps treat shock, bleeding problems, and is helpful in decreasing the animal’s pain.

In the Future...

If your pet is bitten by a rattlesnake, stay calm and keep it quiet. Pets sense and react to the emotions of their owners. Take your pet to a veterinarian as soon as possible. Remove the collar, harness, or anything that the animal may have around its neck. Restrict movement, apply a splint if possible if the animal was bitten on a leg. Carry, do not walk the animal, to help. Give NO medication without consulting a veterinarian. Do not apply a tourniquet or ice to the wound and do not attempt to cut the wound or to “suck out” the venom.

Because of the severity of rattlesnake envenomation, it is best to avoid a rattlesnake bite if possible. Consider leaving your dog at home rather than taking it into an area likely to have rattlesnakes. If you do take your dog along, keep it on a leash and pay attention to the dog. Dogs have been known to innocently chase rattlesnakes, or to throw themselves between an owner and a striking snake. If you live in an area with many rattlesnakes, do not confine your animals outside (in a carrier on the outside back porch, for instance) where they cannot get away from a rattlesnake.

If you have any questions concerning snakebites, please call us.