

Watch out for Rattlesnakes!

By Marby Hambright DVM

Spring, summer and fall are synonymous with an increase in flea, foxtail and rattlesnake activity in this county. Here at Atascadero Pet Hospital and Emergency Center we average 40-60 venomous “snake bite” cases annually. Most cases occur in dogs, but an occasional, unfortunate cat will present. Most recently we were successful in treating a couple of unlucky goat kids.

Rattlesnakes cannot regulate their temperature and are less active when the ambient temperature falls below 50 degrees. Rattlesnakes feed off small rodents, so keeping areas clear of brush and debris where rodents live can help minimize contact with the snakes. If a snake is encountered, it is important to remember that they can strike “one half” of their body length.

Rattlesnake bites in patients are characterized by the onset of sudden pain, swelling, bleeding and sometimes there is evidence of actual puncture wounds. Wounds most often occur on the face and extremities, but can also occur on the tongue or torso and should be addressed aggressively. In general, approximately 25% of the bites are considered “dry bites” with little or no envenomation and 35% will have mild, localized symptoms of pain and swelling. Approximately 40% are considered “severe” due to a combination of neurotoxins and hemotoxins produced by the snake. 5% of the rattlesnake bites are fatal regardless of the treatments used.

If you or your pet is bitten, remain calm and keep movement to a minimum. Immobilize the affected area and try and keep it below the level of the heart. Seek immediate veterinary or medical attention. You should NOT ice or cool the area, NOT apply a tourniquet, NOT use electric shock, or try to cut and “suck” the wound as they may have in the days of the old west!

Treatment with supportive care includes the use of intra-venous fluids (for “shock”), pain management, and antibiotics. We highly recommend the early use of “Antivenin” (a product which helps to neutralize the toxins). Due to the

expense of the Antivenin many patients don't receive it. We do feel the early use of Antivenin can reduce the need for plasma and blood transfusions, and may lessen the overall cost of the treatment. Hyperbaric oxygen therapy can also be used to minimize the soft tissue swelling and tissue destruction. Patients that have been bitten often require multiple days in the hospital, close monitoring of their blood clotting ability and levels of blood proteins.

The use of rattlesnake vaccine is controversial. Due to the rattlesnake vaccines' questionable efficacy, cost and lack of difference in acute care following a snake bite, the University of California Davis Veterinary Teaching Hospital and the Atascadero Pet Hospital and Emergency Center, currently do not advocate the use of the vaccine.

Aversion training is a tool in teaching rattlesnake avoidance and is currently available in San Luis Obispo County. A common sense approach to environmental factors and seasonality should help minimize contact with rattlesnakes, but if you are unfortunate in this regard, we are here to help assess your pet and develop an appropriate treatment plan.