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Rattlesnake Season Strikes: A Message from Bishop Ranch Veterinary Center & Urgent Care on Snake Hazards

In the past few weeks our staff has treated several dogs with serious snakebites. Below are steps you can take to prevent your pet from getting bitten by a rattlesnake, and steps to take in the event of an emergency.

Know the facts about rattlesnakes

Snakes start breeding in April/May and have a three-month gestation period, which means offspring tend to emerge around July/August. Most snakes come out when the temperatures are cooler -- usually early evening and mornings. Snakes will hide in gopher holes, crevices, and under rocks and structures in the back yard making unsuspecting dogs victims when they go about their day-to-day tasks of playing and sniffing. Other dogs will encounter snakes while on a hike with their owners.

Snakebites in animals usually occur on the face or limbs. Wounds vary widely in severity. The amount and type of venom differs with each situation, and some rattlesnake bites contain no venom at all. Puncture marks, swelling and bleeding can indicate a bite and some animals will exhibit pain, lethargy and even seizures.

The seriousness of a snake bite depends on the species of the snake, the size of the dog and the amount of venom injected. Most dogs can be treated, but not without using a costly drug called Antivenin. Many dogs will require hospitalization and IV fluids for several days.

It is important to note that while Antivenin is very helpful in the inactivation of snake venom, there is a narrow window of time in which it must be used. After about 4 hours post-bite, antivenin is of minimal use. So, if you suspect your pet has been bitten, it's better to be safe and get them to the local emergency veterinary clinic than be sorry later.

How to help prevent your dog from being bitten by a rattlesnake:

- Avoid hiking with your pet in peak seasons. Avoid areas with tall grass, rocks or woodpiles.
- Stay on trails and keep dogs on a leash.
- If a snake is encountered, keep pets away. Rattlesnakes can strike up to one-half of their length away. Look around to be sure there are no other snakes nearby, then back straight away from the snake.
- Remove all food sources (exterminate rodents, etc.) and hiding places (wood piles) from areas where your pet is kept.
- Ask your veterinarian if they recommend your dog receive the rattlesnake vaccine.

Signs and symptoms of rattlesnake bites:

- One or two puncture wounds, acute swelling, bleeding and pain are the most common signs of a rattlesnake bite in animals.
- Most bites occur on the face or legs.
- Bites around the face and throat may be more serious.
- Pet may appear agitated or depressed.
- The bite wound may be very painful.
- Uncontrolled bleeding may occur.

What to do if your dog is bitten by a rattlesnake:

- Remain calm and keep your pet calm.
- Immobilize the bitten area and keep it lower than the heart. If your dog is bitten on the leg, carry them, rather than have them walk. This will help reduce blood flow into and out of the leg, and reduce the spread of the venom.
- If your pet is bitten near the neck or head, remove restrictive collars.
- Take your pet to nearest veterinarian or emergency clinic.
- DO NOT apply ice to the area, use a tourniquet, or try to suck or cut the wound.

For more information about snakes and snakebites, read Dr. Utchen's column in the Tri-Valley Herald. Click on this link for the full article: http://www.insidebayarea.com/search/ci_4312052