

## Timber Rattlers vs. Dogs

**This article is in response to a question about treating snake bites in dogs.**

I hike in the desert every day with my 4 dogs (3 mals + 1 mixed-breed). Our area of southern New Mexico has poisonous snakes (primarily rattlers) and non-poisonous snakes (primarily bull snakes). On 4 occasions, my dogs have come upon snakes near the house: 3 rattlesnakes (one was a baby) and 1 very large bullsnake. They were curious but didn't get close, seeming to sense danger. The fact that I was yelling probably diverted their attention somewhat, too. A point you may want to file in your memory: bites from baby snakes are more dangerous than bites from adult snakes. Adult snakes "conserve" their venom in case more than one strike is needed. Baby snakes release it all on the first strike. (I have come across this informative warning in more than one hiking guide.)

I have a book, *Emergency First Aid For Your Dog*, by Tamara S. Shearer, DVM. I think it has been recommended by Tufts Vet. School of Medicine. (I subscribe to their newsletter, and I seem to recall that's how I got the book.) Here are their instructions for snakebite:

### 1. Symptoms (some or all may be present)

- Poisonous snake bites often appear as 2 punctures on the skin.
- Nonpoisonous snake bites are often shaped like a "U" because nonpoisonous snakes tend to have many teeth.
- Poisonous snake bites tend to be especially painful.
- The area around a poisonous snake bite will swell and may show bruising.
- The dog may become depressed, paralyzed, comatose and may die. These symptoms may be preceded by respiratory distress or by digestive upset.

### 2. First Aid Materials

- 2-liter soda bottle.
- Antibiotic ointment (e.g., Polysporin). [I carry Panalog cream.]

### 3. First Aid

- If you suspect the bite is from a poisonous snake:
  - Restrict activity and keep the dog calm.
  - Keep the dog warm by placing 2-liter soda bottles filled with warm water (not hot) against the pet (the bottles should be placed against the stomach and back).
  - Rush the dog to a veterinarian.
- If you suspect the bite is from a nonpoisonous snake:
  - Wash the bite wound with soap and water, then apply antibiotic ointment.
  - Seek veterinary care immediately. The bite could be from a poisonous snake, and even if it is not, your dog may need antibiotic therapy because reptiles have many infectious bacteria in their mouths.

This section of the book is prefaced: "Bites from poisonous snakes pose a threat in many areas of the country. The severity of the bite will depend upon the type of snake, the age of the dog, the size of the dog, the number of bites, the location of the bites and the amount of venom injected. Unless you are skilled at identifying snakes and witness the attack first-hand, it may be difficult to determine whether the snake is poisonous. Therefore, it is urgent that you seek veterinary care immediately. If you wait for obvious symptoms to develop, your vet might be too late to save your pet."

I typically hike 2-5 miles behind my house daily. Getting the dog back to the house and car poses the greatest challenge. I have had to ferry a dog out one time, and it was tough. So I try to plan for contingencies: I have practiced draping the smaller (65 lb.) dogs over my shoulders (not easy, but it is possible), and I have utilized various pieces of clothing and a blanket as a make-shift stretcher. I always hike with a backpack with emergency gear, even on short trips.

I have also read that the razor blade/tourniquet thing is a definite no-no, for people and/or animals.

I hope that you've found this useful.

Roberta Hahn, New Mexico