

Take steps to protect your pet

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LAS CRUCES - If your dog wanders desert terrain during cooler summer mornings and evenings, experts advise you to inoculate it with a rattlesnake vaccine to dramatically improve its chances of survival if bitten.

"It's another tool to prevent a serious consequence from a snake bite," said Joe Jacquez, supervisor of animal control and codes enforcement for the city of Las Cruces. He said it was difficult to put an estimate on the number of dogs suffering from snakebites because most incidents go unreported. But, he said, "we are on the southern part of the country, bordering on Mexico, and so there are rattlesnakes here."

The veterinarian's rattlesnake vaccine - suitable only for dogs - is available year-round at area clinics and typically costs about \$30 each shot. Two initial shots are required, with one booster shot needed every six months after that.

Vaccine's benefits

"This is cost-effective beyond words, considering the benefit of protection," said Julie Gray, a veterinarian for the past 26 years and owner of Arroyo Veterinary Clinic. "If you are in an area where you have seen rattlesnakes, then you should definitely get this vaccine," she said. "It makes a huge, huge difference. I have not seen any dog that was vaccinated die after being bitten. It reduces the reaction to the snake venom by at least 80 percent," she said.

But Dr. Beth Vesco-Mock, executive director of the Animal Services Center of Mesilla Valley, said it is critical to be aware of the limitations of the vaccine.

"When you vaccinate your dog, it is still not fully protected," she said. "The body must make antibodies against the venom," which, she said, typically takes between four to six weeks. "But if you live in the desert area, and your dog is out in the desert, you should definitely get the rattlesnake vaccination," she said.

Suspect a bite? Get to vet

Whether your dog is inoculated or not should not affect whether you take in your pet if you suspect it has a snakebite, experts said.

If your normally active dog becomes sluggish after a romp through the desert - with a limp and swollen face painful to the touch and a wound that won't clot - experts advise taking it immediately to the veterinarian.

"The likeliest way to get your pet to survive is to get them to a vet immediately - within a half hour," said Lisa Astorga, a veterinarian assistant at the Solano Animal Clinic in Las Cruces. "After an hour the chances to survive drop significantly," she said.

Experts say survival depends on a couple of things: how big the poisonous snake is - the smaller, younger snakes being the most potent; how big the dog is; where on the body the dog was bitten - torso bites being more deadly because of closer proximity to major organs; how firm the fangs were implanted to inject maximum venom; and whether the snake had eaten previous to striking the animal.

"If the snake had eaten before biting the dog, then the glands that hold the poison have been partially depleted," Gray said.

Alison Bills has lived in the Talavera area of Las Cruces for about six years and walks her dog, Rudi, in the nearby desert twice day. She said she is mindful of the rattlesnakes in the area so vaccinated her pet last year, and also tries to keep her dog out of the brush.

"For the most part we stay on the dirt roads," she said.

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