



Navarro Small Animal Clinic

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Snakebites

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It is important to know which snakes are venomous and can cause harm to your pets. Pit vipers are commonly found in our area and include water moccasins, copperheads, and rattlesnakes. They account for the majority of all snake bites throughout the US. Pit vipers can be identified by their elliptical pupils and triangular shaped heads. They also have pits between their nostrils and eyes that are heat sensors. Rattlesnakes have keratin rattles on the ends of their tails, which make them very distinctive. They account for the majority of snakebite related deaths to animals in the US. Copperheads can range from pinkish to tan, or even bright orange. Characteristically they have an hourglass design along their back. Identification of the snake that bit your pet will help your veterinarian develop an appropriate treatment plan. Fatal snakebites appear to be more common in dogs than cats. Mortality appears to be generally higher in bites to the abdomen and chest, than in bites to the head or extremities.

Snake bites are a true emergency. Rapid examination and treatment is very important. You will need to contact your veterinarian immediately. You will want to keep your animal quiet and limit its activity. Typical pit viper bites are characterized by severe local tissue damage that spreads. The tissue will swell significantly, become discolored within minutes, and bloody fluid will begin to ooze from the fang wounds. Swelling typically worsens over the first 24 hours and in many cases the dead skin will slough. In severe cases bleeding or clotting disorders can occur.

Your veterinarian will begin treatment immediately and will likely want to monitor your pet for 24 hours or longer in severe cases. The goals of treatment include minimizing local and systemic effects, prevention of secondary bacterial infection, pain management, and supportive care. Antivenom is available for North American pit vipers. It is most effective if administered in the first 6 hours after the bite. The antivenom can help to significantly manage the pain from the bite, as well as improve the patient's clinical condition. In some cases surgical removal of dead tissue is needed.

The best treatment for snakebites is prevention. Keeping dogs in enclosed areas with cement walls or keeping dogs on leashes while outside may prevent contact with snakes. Keeping cats indoors will also help prevent cats from coming into contact with snakes. There are vaccinations available for dogs that help reduce the severity of damage. Dogs and cats previously bitten are not less likely to get bitten in the future.