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Vaccine for dogs debuts
East Bay hikers may save best friends by taking bite out of
rattlesnake run-ins

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Ron Locatelli hiked with dogs for 20 years without trouble before his mutt Brownie bounded ahead of him one September day into the path of a coiled western rattlesnake. Locatelli was aghast. Brownie was curious. The snake was accurate, injecting Brownie with a dose of venom that is a risky fact of outdoor life for dogs that play or live in or near East Bay open spaces and wildlands. Brownie got very sick but survived after two days of hospitalization. On Friday, Locatelli got Brownie a new defense: a rattlesnake vaccine for dogs. Many East Bay veterinary clinics and hospitals are offering the vaccine as a low-cost way to reduce the severity of rattlesnake bites, although there is debate about its effectiveness.

"It's insurance," said Locatelli, a Castro Valley resident who hikes frequently and volunteers to patrol trails in East Bay Regional Park sites. "I always figured I could keep dogs away from rattlesnakes. But the rattle isn't a deterrent to some dogs. It attracts them."

Dogs living far from snake habitat don't need the vaccine, experts say. But dogs in or near ranches, farms, grasslands, regional parks or other open spaces can benefit from the protection, some veterinarians and the vaccine manufacturers say. The vaccine typically costs \$50 to \$60 per dog. In contrast, emergency treatment for severe bites can exceed \$2,000, and not all clinics stock the expensive antivenin vials.

Red Rocks Biologics, the Woodland-based vaccine company, said some studies estimate that rattlesnakes bite some 150,000 domestic animals annually in the nation. The vast majority survive, but some die.

"I recommend the vaccine for dogs in areas with a risk of exposure to rattlesnakes," said Larry Gilman, a vet at the Bishop Ranch Veterinary Center and Urgent Care in San Ramon. His hospital treated Brownie. "The theory is it reduces dogs' reaction to a bite," Gilman said. "If you've ever seen a bite on a dog, you want to reduce the reaction."

Vaccinated dogs that are bitten still need urgent care because the vaccine protection is not absolute. Bites can attack the nerve system and body organs, disrupt blood clotting, damage tissue and cause swelling so severe it can block breathing passages. Bite

reactions can differ widely, depending on the number and location of bites, the size of the dog and the delay before treatment.

The Livermore Veterinary Hospital has vaccinated some 30 to 40 dogs with the vaccine, many of them ranch or hunting dogs, said veterinarian Jerry Bird. Even dogs far from open spaces can get bitten. Gary Paoli of Walnut Creek said his sheltie, Sky Blue, was bitten this summer by a snake that slithered into his San Miguel Drive backyard even though it's not near an open space. His pet survived after two weeks of hospitalization.

"I was very surprised we had a rattlesnake in our yard," Paoli said. "We've lived here for years and I never saw one before." For protection, he installed a cover over his lower fence to exclude snakes. He didn't get Sky Blue vaccinated because the dog had a reaction to the antivenin and is likely allergic to the vaccine.

The Contra Costa Emergency Veterinary center in Concord treats some 30 to 40 dogs a year for rattlesnake bites, a high number because it's open for emergencies around the clock. About half of the dogs were bitten in their yards, and the other half got the bites on trails or in parks, said Benjamin Otten, a veterinarian at the center. While he considers the vaccine promising, Otten said he has never treated a vaccinated dog for a bite, so he can't tell how well it works. The UC Davis veterinary hospital considers the rattlesnake vaccine unproved. "The concept is appealing, but we don't see that the studies have been done to prove its efficacy," said Kate Hopper of the university's small animal hospital.

The federal license to market the vaccine is conditional while more information is collected about its effectiveness. The vaccine stimulates dogs to create antibodies to fight the venom. Redrock surveyed veterinarians and found the majority thought the vaccine was effective, said Hilary Pollock, the administrative manager for the vaccine company. Some vaccinated dogs that are bitten may not exhibit symptoms so their owners may never know of the bite, she said.

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PROTECTING DOGS FROM SNAKEBITE

- Hikers should keep dogs on leashes and stay on trails, especially in mornings or evenings during warm months when rattlesnakes are active.
- Avoid areas with tall grass, rocks or woodpiles.
- Clear wood piles from your yard and food sources that attract rodents, a snake food source.
- Carry emergency veterinary numbers when exercising your dog.
- Discuss with your veterinarian whether a rattlesnake vaccine is appropriate.
- If your dog is bitten, keep it calm but get veterinary help immediately. Do not try to cut or suck the wound.

Sources: Bishop Ranch Veterinary Center and Urgent Care
Lindsay Wildlife

PHOTO: DR. LARRY GILMAN gives Brownie, a shepherd mix owned by Ron Locatelli of Castro Valley, a vaccine to help protect against future rattlesnake bites. Brownie is OK

now but became very sick after being bitten during a hike at Chabot Regional Park in September. (Susan Pollard/ Times).Museum