

San Bernardino County Sun

Rattlesnakes symposium draws variety

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Wednesday, January 12, 2005 - Every year, 35 to 50 people are brought to Loma Linda University Medical Center with snakebites.

Most of the time, antivenin therapy effectively treats the toxin. But doctors and others fascinated by the slithering creatures can learn about the latest research, including therapies for bites, at a symposium at the medical center starting Saturday evening.

"This symposium is aimed largely at an audience of rattlesnake researchers, rattlesnake enthusiasts, medical personnel and anybody just interested in snakes," said William K. Hayes, a rattlesnake researcher and organizer of the weekend event.

Everyone can benefit from a better understanding of snakes, said Dr. Sean Bush, a snake expert whose cases are chronicled on the Animal Planet television series "Venom ER." For instance, people's own behavior often puts them at risk or hinders their treatment after being bitten.

"There are two basic populations that get bit by a rattlesnake," Bush said.

"First you have a middle-age male, who's been drinking, who tries to handle the snake and gets bit on the hand," he said. "Or it's a small child running around playing after school who gets bit on the foot."

Wherever the bite, Bush said people waste time trying to suck the venom out of the wound, instead of heading straight for the doctor. It's impossible, he said, to suck out much venom, and "putting your nasty mouth on the wound can't be good," he said.

Hayes said his research suggests provoking a snake will result in a worse bite more venom injected than will accidentally surprising the rattler. Nonetheless, he said, "the large majority of bites are not accidental."

And harassing a snake can be expensive. Hayes said the treatment for a snake bite runs into the tens of thousands of dollars.

Another myth that kills, both scientists said, is the belief an adult rattlesnake's bite is less toxic than a baby snake's.

"People can then underestimate the severity of a bite from a large snake," Hayes said. "So that's a problem."

There are six species of rattlers locally. The Western diamondback, the South Pacific, the Mojave green, the speckled, the sidewinder and the red diamond rattlesnakes all are active during warm-weather months.

And despite popular belief, these rattlesnakes aren't hybridizing with other, harmless snakes. Nor, most researchers agree, are they evolving to have a stronger, more dangerous venom.

But with a little common sense and respect, most people need never know the pain of a rattler's bite. Even blue jeans offer some protection, Hayes said, decreasing the amount of venom injected in a bite.

"Don't touch them, if you can avoid it," Bush said. "And if you're bitten, the main thing is to go to the hospital as soon as possible. People usually survive snakebites."