

Encounters with Copperheads, a Personal Experience

Contributed by Dena Ray Hayworth

Just a little background: Our dogs are normally quiet but bark when people pull in the drive and when they sense danger...as they are supposed to do. It is there "job". They go insane over snakes and all bark together loudly.

We live in a rural area and our 3 Cocker Spaniels are indoor dogs. When I built the house I designed a "Doggie Room" off of the kitchen where the dogs stay when we are away from home or in bed. This room has a doggie door with access to a 30x30 concrete fenced in lot. This lot can also be access through double door off the living room.

The Event: Monday night June 30th at 12:22am all our dogs started barking incessantly, so we got up and looked out to the lot. They were in a half-circle and my hubby ran down to investigate. Immediately when he went outside he sent the dogs in through the door to the living room and closed the door....there was a Copperhead (venomous snake of the pit viper family) in the lot.



By 12:35am both Chloe and Eddie were on the road to the Emergency Vet. I had called ahead to make them aware they were coming.

Here is what I started to learn.

Copperheads are dangerous but have a very low death rate to dogs from 1-10%, unless bitten in the Eye of Tongue at this point it is very dangerous with a survival rate of about 10% we were told.

Emergency Vet and Hard Choices: Two dogs two different treatment plans. I thought Chloe was worse and soon I would find out how wrong I was. Her eye was blood red and severely swollen, she was drooling and panting. Eddie was squinting his eye and acting tired but there was no swelling or marks we could see. We got them to the vet in under an hour from the bite. Little did we know.

Chloe (8yr Female)- Her eye was red and swollen. She had been bitten above and below her left eye. Chloe's blood work was normal which mean no venom in her bloodstream. Her eye was swollen and she was in pain. Because of the allergic reaction with some dogs given Antivenin, her history of allergic reactions, and her positive blood work and normal behavior we choose to treat her with pain medication and antibiotic pills and eye drops. Chloe was home by 3:30am the same morning. Here she is on the way to the vet.



Eddie (4yr Male)- Blood work showed that the venom was in his bloodstream and causing problems. His was lethargic, panting, in severe pain, and bleeding from his eye. We found out 3 days later he was bitten in the center of his cornea on his right eye. The swelling was so severe the vets could not find the strike location until then. Eddie was dying.

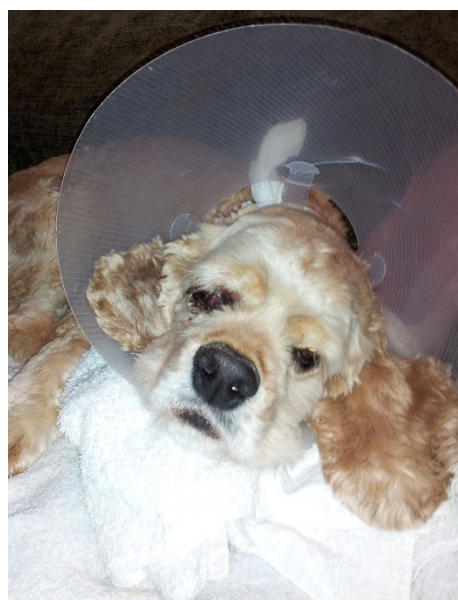
We chose to have antivenin administered (\$649). I stopped by to see him on the way to work at June 30th @ 4:45am and he was pitiful. Luckily strong pain meds (morphine) were helping him be comfortable. Around 11:00am I got a call from the vet...Eddie's blood work was not improving they strongly suggested a plasma Transfusion (\$400), we agreed to the treatment. I stopped at 2:30pm on the same day to check him. The next round of blood work showed great improvement. He could not walk and was lethargic with massive swelling around his eye. Still not sure he would make it.

Tuesday July 1st he was a bit better although still weak when I visited. Wednesday July 2nd he was walking and almost all swelling was gone. His eye looked bad but he was going to survive! The Ophthalmologist said the eye would have to be removed. We took him home that day to keep him until surgery. He was given pain meds, antibiotics and 3 different eye drops.

He improved greatly over the next few days. His eye however, continued to deteriorate. It turned opaque and at times a bloody brown color. The center seemed to droop and would bulge out when he barked. He ate well and started trying to be very active.

Pictures below from left to right: Eddie at ER 1 hour after bite, Eddie on Wed morning at vet, Eddie home and resting on the couch Thursday.

Surgery Day: Enucleation (eye removal) on Monday July 7th for Eddie



Bear. We took him at 8am to my normal vet where they announced his eye was rupturing. I have never been so glad for my OCD ways. I had called Saturday July 5th morning to schedule the surgery and they agreed to work us in no matter what.

His surgery began around lunch and he was out of surgery and doing well by 2pm. We were allowed to pick him up at 5:30pm and take him home. We have to keep him from the other dogs for 3 days and I stayed home from work to observe him. He would not eat but did drink a small amount. We administered his pain meds every 8 hours. Tuesday he improved somewhat and ate 2 meals once around 2pm and then dinner. He drank well and wagged his tail once or twice. My otherwise extremely active dog slept on the couch most of the day. Here he is after arriving home resting on the couch again.



10 Days Out: Chloe is her normal Alpha self. Her eye, eating, and behavior is completely back to normal. She still has a few days of antibiotics and drops left.

Eddie is not so lucky. My tough little trooper is still recovering from the surgery and it breaks my heart to look at him knowing he is in pain. He is happy though, he is eating, wanting to snuggle and trotting around the lot on his laps when we let him out to relieve himself. He has a rough few weeks ahead of him.

Tally: \$2800 including surgery and medications. Worth every dime and I would do it again. Our vets were upfront and honest about all treatment cost and options.

What I learned and what to know: DO NOT Listen to most postings on the internet where people say “dogs are fine with a poisonous snake bite”. They are in fact in great pain and need at the very least blood work to check for venom in the blood, pain medication and antibiotics. Know the facts about antivenin reactions and whether they are needed for your dog, it saved Eddie, however, I’m convinced Chloe would not have survived it with her history of allergic reactions. Just because you do not see immediate signs of a bite double and triple check. Eddie’s bite was not visible but his behavior clued us in, full effects are not felt for 45 min. He was lethargic and would not move or open his eye. Do for them what you would do for you! If I got bit I’m going to the ER so they are too.

Going forward we are going to confine the dogs to the house at night and shut off their doggie door access until morning. I hate to do it but until snakes are hibernating this will be the case. We do not have brush piles or areas where snakes should want to be- this was a freak accident of living in a rural area. I have been here 36 years always had pets and never had a snake bite! Knowledge is priceless and I want to share our story for other pups like Eddie.