

Caution urged when in rattler territory

Janis Leering: The Mirror

Even though the provincial government has provided one-time funding of \$180,000 for antivenin, Darlene Upton believes people still need to do more to avoid being bitten by a rattlesnake.

Upton is chair of the Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnake Recovery Team at Georgian Bay Islands National Park, and she said that antivenin should be used as a last resort.

"One of the issues with the rattlesnake is that people aren't able to identify it, because there are four other snakes that look like it," said Upton.

The Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnake is the only venomous snake in Ontario, and it was added to Canada's Threatened Species list in 1991.

The way to tell a Massasauga apart from other species of snakes are its pupils, which run vertical in the eye, the tail rattle, and the large heat-sensing pit between the nostril and the eye.

The rattle itself sounds like a

with no animal byproducts, and it costs \$1,300. There are usually less negative reactions to it with humans," said Gord Key, executive director of HDH.

They also have to confirm a venomous snake bit the patient before wasting the antivenin treatment.

"The new funding from the ministry is good news for our patients and our communities, since we will no longer have to absorb this cost out of our operating budget.

"It will enable our hospital to provide the very best treatment in the world for rattlesnake bites."

The antivenin has a two-year expiration date, and Key said the hospital has already used 13 of its 24 vials this year.

"Two people were admitted to hospital and treated with the antivenin, while a third person was observed and released."

He said the hospi-

the eye, the ear, the nose, and the large heat-sensing pit between the nostril and the eye.

The rattle itself sounds like a wind-up toy, or the buzz of an insect. The rattlesnakes don't aggressively seek out humans, and don't always rattle when one comes near.

"The rattlesnake was normally found in a larger range across Ontario, but the habitat has been shrinking."

Now there are only four main areas in the province where the snakes can be found, which include the Bruce Peninsula, Wainfleet Bog, and the Ojibway prairie complex in Windsor.

The venom of the snake possesses a digestive enzyme that the snakes inject into a prey species, such as a vole or mouse, when they bite them. The venom disrupts blood flow, and eventually kills the prey. If threatened, a Massasauga may defend itself by biting a human, and may or may not inject venom in the person.

Sometimes the snake may be smart enough to realize that it can't eat something as big as a human, so it won't use any venom.

"Statistics show that 25 per cent of rattlesnake bites are dry bites, just used as a defensive bite."

Upton said the Rattlesnake Recovery Team is trying different actions to help the species, such as educating people about living with the snake.

This year, three patients have been taken to Huronia District Hospital after being bitten by a Massasauga.

Two of them required vials of antivenin, which can cost anywhere from \$250 to \$1,300 per vial.

The old antivenin is made from horse serum, and doctors usually have to do skin tests before using it on a patient.

"The new serum is synthetic,

third person was observed and released."

He said the hospital is still keeping tabs on a young girl who was bitten in July.

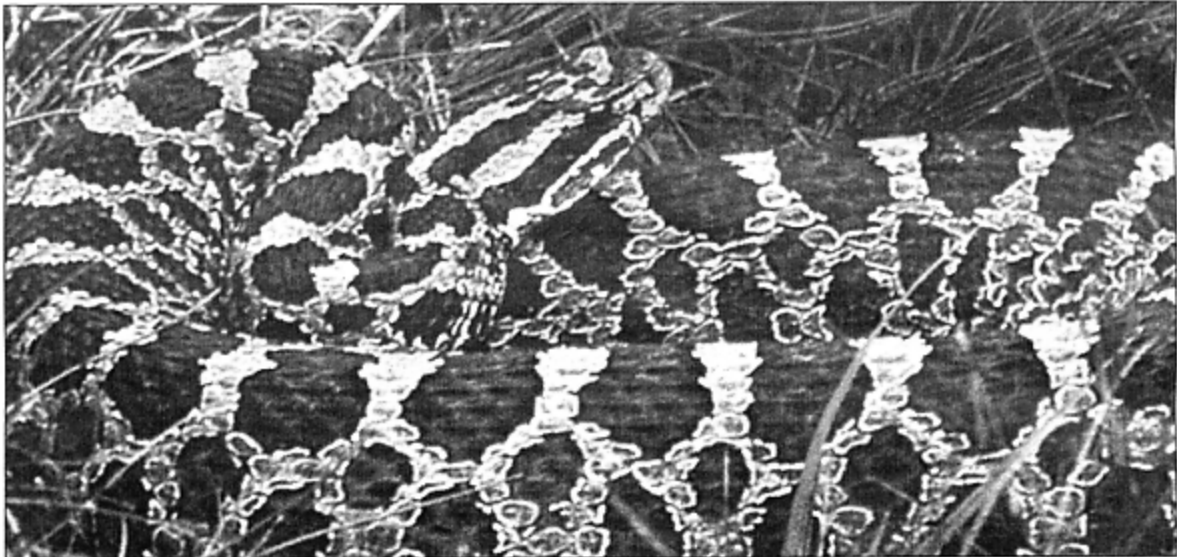
"We're still learning (about treatment). We thought a younger person would have less of a reaction, and need less antivenin, but it's the opposite."

Key is hoping that eventually the hospital in Parry Sound will organize training for HDH on treatment.

"Parry Sound has had six bites of their own this year, and we're hoping with this new funding, we can rely on Parry Sound to be a depot for the antivenin, since they see more bites than we do here. We'd also like them to organize training, so we can follow the same protocols with drug treatment."

The Massasauga rattlesnake is a shy snake that prefers to use its camouflage to hide from humans, rather than strike at them.

If it should bite, doctors recommend not using a tourniquet or sucking out the venom. Keep the person still, and try to get as much information on the snake as possible before



going to the hospital.

Upton and others at Georgian Bay Islands National Park are active in teaching people how to prevent themselves from being bitten. "People need to be aware of

their surroundings, and look at the ground where they are walking. Wear proper shoes, like hiking boots with socks, and keep a flashlight handy at night.

"The rattlesnakes only bite if

they are threatened, harassed or stepped on."

For details about preventing a bite, contact HDH at 526-3751, or check out the Web sites www.gbayreptiles.com.