

Self Immunization - A Dangerous Road To Travel

By [Joel La Rocque](#)

Since childhood, I have had an uncontrollable drive to learn everything possible concerning snakes. The species or sub-species made no difference at all, I was completely captivated by any snake that crossed my path both in real life or on paper. There are between 2.800 and 3.000 species of snakes living today and new species are being discovered yearly from around the world. As I grew up and finally left home, I was able to seek out different species and spend time actually handling them and adding to my notes. I became interested in venomous species after receiving a bite on my left hip while crossing a beaver dam one evening in Georgia. My right leg had went through the top layer of dried sticks and as I went down, I managed to drag a Southern Cottonmouth (*Agkistrodon p. piscivorus*) down with me and when I hit the bottom it turned and one fang hit my wallet and the other hit my on the hip.

After escaping the scene, I was taken to a country doctor who looked after me in his kitchen for a few hours. He was a real country MD who was semi retired and just saw folks from the country side when they needed him, in the comfort of his living room. We talked and he explained quite a bit about venomous snakes that I had not already learned. He told me things that captivated me, things like, a snake can inject venom from the left or right fang, from both fangs or not inject any venom at all. He said I was lucky and the snake that tagged me delivered a "Dry" bite and injected no venom! By the time I left that doctors home I had decided to make venomous snakes my specialty of study, and at 21 years old, I had a few years ahead of me to learn what I could about these amazing creatures.

Little did I know that at the age of sixty I would still only have scratched the surface with regards to the secrets snakes hide from humans. Since that day in 1972, there has not been a day that passed in which snakes had not been a topic of conversation in one way or another. I have made it a point to learn something new about these wonderful creatures every day since then. That was 38 years ago and I still learn something new every day, believe it or not. Scientist are still ignorant when it comes to knowing all there is to know about these creatures and with new technology coming of age all the time, new facts are being learned constantly and old beliefs are being replaced by new fact.

In 1995, I had been reading about a man who is considered the father of serpentology, Mr. Bill Haast of Miami Serpentarium had been working with snakes almost all of his 80 years and still remained very active in the world of Herpetology. Name a snake and Bill has most likely worked with it and probably been bitten by it at one time or another. He had started injecting himself with minute amounts of Elapid venom, from snakes such as cobras, krates, coral snakes and mambas to name but a few in order to build up an immunity to their venom which could save his life should he receive a bite from one in the future. His efforts were not in vein when he received a bite from an Indian cobra with very little reaction to the venom. His body had built up its own anti venom against the snakes he had used in the serum he perfected.

In more then one instance, his blood was injected into snake bite victims who could not take anti venom with the same results as the anti venom would have delivered, a complete reversal of symptoms and a full recovery. The venom Elapids, is for the most part a neurotoxin and does little destruction to tissue, it merely stops organs from functioning. In most instances, the venom of a cobra for example will shut down the nerve centers which signal the lungs to function and death is a result of respiratory failure, in others, the muscles stop functioning, the heart forgets to pump blood and death is a result of cardiac failure and so on. Vipers and Pit Vipers are different for the most part in that they destroy tissue as well as the tissue of certain organs. The necrotic tissue is spilled into the blood stream and filtered by the Kidneys. If the destruction is so bad that gross amounts of debris are carried by the blood to the Kidneys, they Kidneys become clogged and the end result is death due to Kidney failure. A death such as I just described is extremely painful and drug out. Even in cases where the patient's life is saved, the loss of an appendage is a very real consequence. Vipers and Pit vipers in my opinion are by far the most dangerous when comparing which family of snake is the most lethal or dangerous. Pit Vipers, are by far my snakes of choice to work with and study. They are the newest snakes to have evolved and possess the most sophisticated devices to deliver venom and to detect both prey and predators alike. A Rattlesnake like the

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Eastern diamondback is the stealth fighter of the reptile world and is by far more sophisticated and dangerous than any cobra or mamba ever thought of being.

Being that I worked for the most part with Vipers and Pit Vipers, it made no sense to inject myself with venom from a snake that I might never work with much less be bitten by, but how to determine the amounts of venom needed to do the job was the biggest obstacle in my way and would the different venom's interact with one and other? I studied every biology and chemistry book that dealt with venom's and obtained a few answers but not all. I figured out what the lethal amount of venom from each species of snake was for the route I intended to use on myself which turned out to be the subcutaneous route for injection of the venom cocktail I had brewed up. The final venom's to be used were obtained from the Eastern diamondback rattlesnake (*Crotalus adamanteus*), the Southern copperhead (*Agkistrodon c. contortrix*), the humped nosed viper (*Ammodytes viper*) and the White Lipped Tree Viper (*Trimeresurus albolabris*).

These four venom's were dried and weighed, the exact amount needed was taken and mixed into a normal saline dilutant. It was refrigerated then lowered into liquid nitrogen until ready for use. I checked every value that I had come up with and then re checked it again. In reality, what I was about to do was no different than sticking my hand inside the tank with one member of each species there to deliver a controlled amount of venom into my body, in plain English, it was equal to being bitten by each of the four snakes represented at once. I had waited almost two years for this and it took almost a week to build up the courage, what if I were allergic to one of the venom's? What if the four together formed some super venom that would render me paralyzed for life? Every possible thought of horror filtered through my mind and in one wild insane moment, I thawed the venom, drew up 1cc into an insulin syringe and cleaned off a spot on my left arm. I held my breath, stuck the needle in and pushed the plunger.

It took about five seconds for the first reaction to set in, "PAIN + was flowing through my arm, I had received broken bones that were a joy compared to the pain I was now experiencing, I was on fire from my finger tips to my shoulder. What had I done? Should I go to the ER and if I did, what would I tell them? I could be shipped to some loony bin for attempted suicide or some other such charge and what about my family? I suddenly realized that I had only been bitten by a snake and I should treat it as such! I elevated my arm, I took a cool can of coke and rolled it up and down my arm which gave immediate relief, I knew to never apply ice but the cool can did just a good with out the bad effects of ice on the wound. After about eight hours, the pain subsided and the area around the injection turned black and blue. In a few days, the skin of the arm from my shoulder to my elbow started to peel just like a sunburn, with new fresh skin underneath. After a week, all of the effects of the injection had resolved back to normal but I decided to cut the dose by 50% for the next injection, which would be in about two weeks.

My schedule was one injection on different parts of the body every three weeks unless an adverse effect arises. three weeks had rolled around and I had experienced nothing out of the ordinary and the next injection was ready at 1/2 the last dose. I injected it in the right arm with only minimal pain which lasted only for a day or so. The peeling took place again but this time it was not as broad an area as before. As the week progressed I noticed one unusual event which involved a taste in my mouth, it was metallic for lack of a better description and I had to chew gum to get relief. After drinking a beer or two, the taste became so bad that gum would not even start to mask its unpleasant presence. I was in my mid forty's and I had drank at least a six pack of beer every day of my life since my eighteenth birthday, rain or shine, I did love my beer and that was the only bone of contention that my wife Janice and I ever fought about since we married in 1970.

The taste became so unpleasant that I had to stop drinking beer right then and there, to this date, I have not had one drink in well over ten years and now Janice and I argue over who is the better actor, John Wayne or Ethan Hawke? I don't even know who Ethan Hawke is for God's sake. The only other effect of my venom cocktail was that I dropped almost 35 pounds which may have been a result of the lack of dead calories from the beer that I was no longer drinking? The bad taste eventually faded away and I felt better in body and in spirit, again it could have been from removing the alcohol from my system but what ever the

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cause, I was in good shape. I upped the dose of each separate venom by micrograms every third injection and stopped when I was able to take 10 milligrams of venom subcutaneously with out reaction and only take a booster once a month now.

The test came one late December afternoon when a young man pulled up to my home and got a box from his back seat. He smiled and said "wait till you see what I got" I suddenly recognised the boy from a safety class I had taught a few weeks earlier, He held out the box and with out warning, the bottom fell open and a five foot, very angry Eastern diamondback fell to my feet. The kid turned ghost white and I told him to freeze, I must have twitched a bit because the snake tagged my right foot with both fangs embedded rather deeply into my flesh. I told the kid to get the plastic cooler off my back porch and I pinned the snake with a small tree branch and got it from behind the head. I dropped the snake into the cooler and shut the lid. The boy kept saying "I'm sorry, I'm sorry", what would you have done if a child had been standing here and it had bitten him or her? He almost started crying and he got in his car and left, I still have the snake and she has settled down remarkably over the years.

As for the bite, I knew I had been given a healthy dose because I milked the remaining venom from the snake and she had just over 100 milligrams left which led me to believe she had given me somewhere in the neighborhood of 125 to 150 milligrams of venom, that is the lethal dose for a man my size. My leg swelled up and it turned black and blue from my toes to my knee and it stopped there. It was three weeks before I could put any weight on the leg but I was alive and my immunology project had saved my life if not my leg. To this date, that kid has never called to see how I fared after the bite and I hope it scared him enough to stick to small non venomous species of snakes. I also reformatted my lectures to include the proper containers to carry snakes in and a cardboard box is not a proper container.

I probably get four calls or letters a year asking me the best method of starting an immunology project with various species of snakes and my answer is always the same, "Don't do it". Does that make me a hypocrite or someone who wants to hoard the information all to himself? I say NO. I refuse to help someone for the same reasons that others refused to help me! Humans are individuals and each acts separately to any toxin injected into the body. I am not by any sense of the word a medical doctor, I know how to treat myself if bitten but I don't know how to treat anyone else other then getting them to a doctor who can help them. To undertake a project like this, takes a great deal of study and has to have a good amount of luck to boot.

If you were sensitive to a venom, an anaphylactic reaction could kill you within five minutes after the injection. Had I not done it years ago, I would not start doing it now, there are to many cons that could end up putting you in a box or paralyzed in some bed for the rest of your life and nothing is worth that. I chose to immunize against Pit Vipers and Vipers because I work with them every day and have received a few more tags since the Eastern diamondback bite and I am pleased with the results of my project. If I specialized in non venomous snakes, I would never have started it anyway, there would have never been a need. In the end, the benefits well outweigh the risks especially when I stopped drinking and dropped the 35 excess pounds. The one other added bonus comes from the Southern Copperhead venom I have used over the years! This venom contains a small protein which is called "Contortrostatin" and has been proven to halt cancer in its tracks, it stops the spread or migration of cancer to other parts of the body and shrinks the tumor if one exists. So I came out smelling pretty good but please I am begging you, talk to your family doctor prior to undertaking any program that has anything to do with your health. That was the reason for not stating the amounts of venom used and how it was transformed into a vaccine from raw venom. There is no quick fixes out there and standard medical treatment is still the golden rule for halting any disease.

This was my story and I do not have any regrets for any of the actions I have taken, as unethical as they might seem. My story is exactly that, my story and only a fool would attempt to copy me as the vital parts to my vaccine have been left out. Do yourself a favor and go mainstream, if you deal with venomous species of snakes on a daily basis, you have to decide for yourself as to which is the best way to overcome a bite but I reiterate, "Go Mainstream", it is much safer. Proper instruction when handling venomous snakes

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is essential and there is absolutely no substitute for proper training and even then it takes years to graduate with the title of "Expert handler". Be safe!