

Rattlesnakes



How Can Rattlesnakes Be Identified?

Although rattlesnakes have several distinctive features, many people are not sure how to identify one. Using the snake's color or pattern is NOT a reliable method of identification. Looking for the characteristic rattle on the tail is a good method, but sometimes these rattles are lost.

Rattlesnakes have a powerful body, thin neck and a well-defined triangular or arrow-shaped head. Their eyes are hooded and the pupils of the eyes are oval (like a cat) rather than round. **BE SAFE: Do NOT** get close enough to a rattlesnake to see what shape pupils it has unless it is safely captured. Getting that close is a good way to get bitten in the face.

How Are Non-poisonous Snakes Different From Rattlesnakes?

In comparison, non-poisonous snakes have round pupils in their eyes. A non-poisonous snake tends to look more like a snake a child rolls out of clay: the head, neck and body have more-or-less the same diameter. They do not share the distinct skinny neck of the rattlesnake. This is true only of snakes native to California and does not apply to exotic snakes or snakes imported into California from elsewhere.

The Pacific Gopher snake and the common Bull snake have markings that are similar to a rattlesnake. These rattlesnake-like markings are a protective defense against enemies. But neither the Gopher Snake nor the Bull snake has the distinctive skinny neck that a rattler has. Still, many people are fooled into thinking that a Gopher or Bull snake is a rattlesnake. Bull snakes and Gopher snakes can cause a painful bite but they are not dangerous like a rattlesnake.

What Do I Do For Initial First Aid?

Because most Californians live in rattlesnake country, a snakebite emergency plan should be developed before it is needed. If you are less than one hour from the nearest emergency room, initial treatment is relatively simple:

- Try to calm the victim.
- Gently wash the area with soap and water.
- Apply a cold, wet cloth over the bite.
- Call 9-1-1.

What Should NOT Be Done After A Rattlesnake Bite?

Several DON'Ts are very important to remember:

- DON'T apply a tourniquet.
- DON'T pack the bite area in ice.
- DON'T cut the wound with a knife or razor.
- DON'T use your mouth to suck out the venom.
- DON'T let the victim drink alcohol.
- DON'T apply electric shock.

The preceding treatments will NOT help the victim and are dangerous. Applying ice or a tourniquet can block circulation, which can result in gangrene and eventual loss of the limb due to amputation. Cutting

the wound can cause excessive bleeding. Because human mouths are full of bacteria, sucking the venom from the wound can cause infection, making treatment more difficult.

Have An Emergency Plan

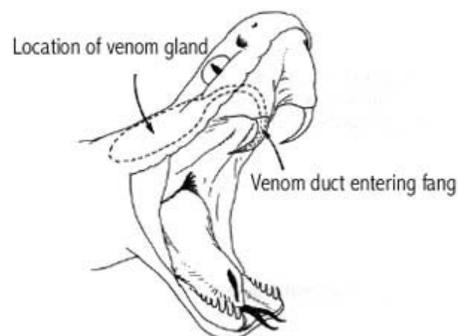
If you will be more than one hour from an emergency facility, your emergency snakebite plan becomes more complicated. You need to know the following information:

- Where is the nearest hospital emergency room?
- How long will it take 9-1-1 emergency responders to arrive on the scene?
- How close will you be to a fire department, park ranger, highway patrol, sheriff or Coast Guard station?

If you will be a great distance from emergency assistance, you should:

- Always hike or camp with a buddy who will be able to go for help.
- Take along a portable phone.
- Notify people where you will be and check in with them.

If you are going to be in the wilderness, it is a good idea to carry a Sawyer Extractor® snakebite kit. These snakebite kits can be bought at most sporting goods stores. Each kit contains a syringe-like device that exerts one atmosphere of reverse pressure. The device extracts the venom from the wound without the complications of bleeding or wound contamination. It is important to know that the Sawyer Extractor® removes less than half the venom injected into the wound. Using a Sawyer Extractor® kit is definitely NOT a substitute for treatment in an emergency room. Read the kit directions BEFORE snakebite occurs.



What Kinds Of Symptoms Develop After A Rattlesnake Bite?

A rattlesnake may strike without injecting venom, inflicting what is called a "dry bite." Even though the victim is not poisoned, the painful bite can still become infected. All rattlesnake bites require medical attention in an emergency room.

If a rattlesnake injects venom into the wound, a variety of symptoms develop: swelling, pain, bleeding at the site, nausea, vomiting, sweating, chills, dizziness, weakness, numbness or tingling of the mouth or tongue, and changes in the heart rate and blood pressure. Other symptoms can include excessive salivation, thirst, swollen eyelids, blurred vision, muscle spasms and unconsciousness. Rattlesnake venom also interferes with the ability of the blood to clot properly.

What Is The Treatment For A Rattlesnake Bite?

Severe symptoms can be life-threatening and must be treated with antivenin, a prescription medication. Antivenin is given intravenously with fluids. Other therapy may include numerous laboratory tests, antibiotics and an update on the tetanus shot, if needed.

Is A Rattlesnake Bite Always Deadly?

Nationwide, there are over 800 cases of rattlesnake bites reported annually to the American Association of Poison Control Centers. Of these reported bites, only one to two cases per year result in death of the patient. Although complications such as possible blood clotting problems, allergic reactions to treatment,

infection and shock may develop, the majority of rattlesnake bites are successfully treated with as little as two to three days of hospitalization.

What Can Be Done To Prevent A Bite?

Hands, feet, and ankles are the most common sites for rattlesnake bites. Using some common sense rules can prevent most snake bites.

- Never go barefooted or wear sandals when walking in the rough. Always wear hiking boots.
- Always stay on paths. Avoid tall grass, weeds and heavy underbrush where there may be snakes.
- Use a walking stick when hiking. If you come across a snake, it can strike the stick instead of you.
- Always look for concealed snakes before picking up rocks, sticks or firewood.
- Always check carefully around stumps or logs before sitting.
- When climbing, always look before putting your hands in a new location. Snakes can climb walls, trees and rocks and are frequently found at high altitudes.
- Never grab "sticks" or "branches" while swimming. Rattlesnakes are excellent swimmers.
- Baby rattlesnakes are poisonous! They can and do bite. Leave them alone.
- Never hike alone. Always have a buddy to help in case of an emergency. Learn basic life-saving methods.
- Don't handle fresh killed snakes. You may still be bitten.
- Never tease a snake to see how far it can strike. You can be several feet from the snake and still be within striking distance.
- Don't keep rattlesnakes as pets. The majority of rattlesnake bites occur when people (usually intoxicated young men in their 20s) tease or play with their "pet" rattlesnake.
- Teach children to respect snakes and to leave snakes alone. Curious children who pick up snakes are frequently bitten.
- Always give snakes the right of way!

Information provided by the [California Poison Control System](http://www.calpoison.org) Web site. <http://www.calpoison.org>