

What To Do, and Not Do in Case of a Snake Bite

Do not wait for symptoms to appear, call 911

Don't let fear of snakes stop you and your family from hiking or biking the trails as the days heat up and sunlight lingers.

While you should stay away from venomous snakes, you are more likely to die from a lightning strike than from a snakebite. Of the 7,000 to 8,000 people in the United States bitten annually by venomous snakes approximately five die, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#).

The number of deaths from a venomous snake bite would be much higher if people did not seek medical care, according to the CDC.

To stay safe, arm yourself with prevention and protection tips.

“Educate yourself, be smart and make good choices, but understand that you are pretty unlikely to be harmed by a snake,” says [Christen Benke, DO](#), a [family medicine physician](#) at [Scripps Clinic Del Mar](#). “If you do get bit, hospitals are well-equipped with antivenom procedures. Snake bites rarely result in fatalities, especially if you know how to respond.”

Symptoms of venomous snakebite

Snakes are most active during warmer months. In San Diego County, snake season typically spans from spring through fall.

If you are bit by a snake, stay calm and act quickly. Severe pain, swelling and color change at the site and lightheadedness are symptoms of a poisonous bite.

Other symptoms include:

- Puncture marks at wound site
- Nausea, vomiting or diarrhea
- Labored breathing
- Rapid heart rate, weak pulse, low blood pressure
- Disturbed vision
- Metallic, mint or rubber taste in the mouth
- Increased salivation and sweating
- Numbness or tingling around face and/or limbs
- Muscle twitching

Call 911 immediately

If you are bitten, call 911 to get medical attention as soon as possible. If you have to find a phone, stay calm and walk at a relaxed pace.

“Your goal is to get to a hospital as soon as possible to be assessed for possible antivenom treatment,” says Dr. Benke. “For best results, antivenom treatment should be given as soon as possible after the bite. It is usually given within four hours of a bite.”

While waiting for emergency help to arrive:

- Lay or sit down with the bite in a neutral position of comfort.
- Wash the bite with soap and water.
- Cover the bit with a clean, dry dressing.
- Remove any jewelry or tight-fitting clothing in case of swelling.
- Keep affected area below heart level if possible to keep venom from spreading.

What not to do

- Do not pick up the snake or try to trap it.
- Do not wait for symptoms to appear if bitten; get medical help right away.
- Don’t apply a tourniquet. This may cut off blood flow to the affected area.
- Don’t pack the bite area in ice.
- Don’t cut the wound with a knife or razor. Making an incision may damage internal body structures.
- Don’t use your mouth to suck out the venom.
- Don’t drink alcohol, caffeine or take any medication.
- Don’t use a snakebite kit. Commercial kits often contain a blade for making an incision, which may damage internal body structures. The kits sometimes also include suction devices, which are ineffective at removing venom.

What to look for

It’s important to know the types of snakes you might encounter on certain trails or walking the golf course. In Southern California, the most common venomous snake you are likely to stumble upon is the rattlesnake.

“Rattlesnakes are a fact of life in Southern California,” says Dr. Benke. “Be informed and then go outside and enjoy the warm weather.”

Rattlesnakes are usually quite easy to identify:

- Triangular-shaped head
- Spotted body
- Distinctive rattle on the tail

Baby rattlesnakes are dangerous because they usually release as much venom as they can to protect themselves.

For more information, call the California Poison Control System at [\(800\) 222-1222](tel:(800)222-1222).

How to prevent snake bites

Taking a few precautions and staying aware of your surroundings can go a long way toward preventing a trip to the emergency room.

Protect your skin

Hide your ankles and wear sturdy shoes. High ankle socks will help protect your ankles from unexpected snakebites while hiking or running.

Take notice of warning signs

Heed the warning signs of snakes in an area. Always stay on the trail. Crevices between rocks, tall thick grass and mossy areas near waterfalls or rivers are favorite hangouts for snakes.

Be careful where you step

Pay attention. Watch where you plant your feet. You don't want to frighten a sun-bathing snake in the middle of the trail or golf course.

Don't panic

If you see a snake, don't panic. Slowly back away from the snake and either try to find a way around or go back the way you came. Snakes tend not to harm people unless they are provoked. Respect their space, and they will respect yours. Never taunt a snake.

Carry your cell phone

Carry your cell phone, especially if you're going to be out alone in an area where snakes are active. Better yet, go with someone if possible. If you do get bit, having someone to assist you will be helpful.

Call animal control if snake on property

If you live in San Diego County and need to remove a snake from your property, call Animal Services at [619-236-2341](tel:619-236-2341).

Avoid nighttime trail walks

Snakes can be active during the day, but are also nocturnal since they have to remain in motion on cold nights to maintain their body temperature. Snakes also hunt at night since their heat sensors allow them to detect prey unseen. It's too easy to miss seeing a snake in the dark.