

Rattlesnake Bites



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Rattlesnakes are seen throughout the United States with a more common sighting in the Southwest and Southeast. Look for rattlesnakes on open trails, under rocks, in bushes, and even in small trees. Snakes are able to swim and are found around water (nearby their food source). The number of snakes is dependent on the weather conditions which permit a large production of seeds and rodents. They appear with triangular-shaped heads, slit type pupils of their eyes, heat sensing facial pits between the nostrils and the eyes, plus usually rattles on the tail. There are approximately 8,000 such bites annually in the United States with 20% to 25% of the bites not containing venom. Most fatal cases (9-15 cases per year) of snake bites occur with children, the elderly, and those with delayed treatment. Young snakes are considered more dangerous as they do not yet have control of venom in the bites.

There are three classifications of snake bites. A minimal level snake bite has trauma just at the bite site, but there is no generalized symptoms related to the bite. A moderate level snake bite has symptoms as swelling beyond the bite site, but has no life threatening general symptoms. A severe level of snake bite involves the entire arm or leg and severe generalized symptoms.

The symptoms by percentage of occurrence for rattlesnake bites include:

- One or two fang marks (over 90%)
- More pain at bite site as would be expected from just a puncture wound (over 50%). Pain occurs within 5 minutes.
- Swelling at the site and swelling continuing up the leg or arm (over 50%) Swelling occurs within 30 minutes.
- Weakness and dizziness (over 50%)
- Numbness and tingling of the mouth and tongue (over 50%). Also metallic taste in the mouth.
- Bruising and small blistering about the bite (over 50%)
- Rapid heart rate (over 50%)
- Nausea and vomiting (less than 50%)
- Chills and fever.

- **Low or high blood pressure (less than 50%)**
- **Muscle twitching (less than 15%)**

If the snake bite occurs in the field, do the following:

- **Keep the part of the body with the bite below the level of the heart.**
- **Remove any constricting items as rings, watches, and tight clothing.**
- **Keep the person warm.**
- **Avoid giving the person caffeine or alcohol.**
- **DO NOT use ice, tourniquet, or incisions at the bite site.**
- **Take the person immediately to a hospital.**
- **If the snake is dead, take the snake to the hospital for identification.**

The hospital treatment of a snake bite includes: inspecting the bite site, monitoring the person, measuring frequently for swelling near the bite site, and cleaning the bite.

The person with progressive or severe symptoms may receive antivenin. The antivenin is most effective if given within 4 hours following the bite. The antivenin is less effective if given to the person over 12 hours following the bite. Note- the person is tested for sensitivity to the antivenin prior to administration. The person may also receive a tetanus shot, pain medicine, and antibiotics. The person with the snake bite is observed in the hospital for reduction or progression of symptoms.

Tips to avoid snake bites:

- **Wear high top, leather hiking shoes, specialized snake boots, or snake shields worn from foot to knee (called snake proof gaiters).**
- **Avoid close contact with the snake. Keep clear of the snake. Avoid teasing the snake.**
- **Remember that a rattlesnake can bite a person more than once.**
- **Also remember that a rattlesnake may be agitated by the first person walking by it, but may bite the second person walking by it. The snake is capable of biting more than one person.**
- **Carry a 6 foot walking stick.**
- **Shuffle-walk backwards away from the snake.**
- **Avoid snake habitat as thick brush, water ponds, piles of smaller pieces of brush, and smaller rocks the size of a basketball (these are common areas for natural food of rattlesnakes).**