

# Snake Bites

Every state but Maine, Alaska, and Hawaii is home to at least one of 20 domestic poisonous snake species, according to a study in the August 1, 2002, issue of *The New England Journal of Medicine*. Each year, nearly 8,000 people receive poisonous snake bites in the United States, and about 5 of those people will die. Because people who are bitten cannot always positively identify a snake, they should seek prompt care for any bite, though they may think the snake is nonpoisonous. Even a bite from a so-called “harmless” snake can cause an infection or allergic reaction in some individuals.

## Types of Poisonous Snakes

Two families of venomous snakes are native to the United State. The vast majority are pit vipers, of the family Crotalidae, which include rattlesnakes, copperheads and cottonmouths (water moccasins). Pit vipers get their common name from a small “pit” between the eye and nostril that detects heat and allows the snake to sense prey at night. These snakes deliver venom through two fangs that the snake can retract at rest, but which spring into biting position rapidly. Virtually all of the venomous bites in this country are from pit vipers. The other family of domestic poisonous snakes is Elapidae, which includes two species of coral snakes found chiefly in the Southern states. Related to the much more dangerous Asian cobras and kraits, coral snakes have small mouths and short teeth, which give them a less efficient venom delivery than pit vipers. People bitten by coral snakes lack the characteristic fang marks of pit vipers, sometimes making the bite hard to detect.

## Common Symptoms of Poisonous Snake Bites

While each individual may experience symptoms differently, the following are the most common symptoms of poisonous snake bites:

- Bloody wound discharge
- Fang marks in the skin and swelling at the site of the bite
- Severe localized pain
- Diarrhea
- Burning
- Convulsions
- Fainting
- Dizziness
- Weakness
- Blurred vision

- Excessive sweating
- Fever
- Increased thirst
- Loss of muscle coordination
- Nausea and vomiting
- Numbness and tingling
- Rapid pulse

### **First Aid for Snake Bites**

Call for emergency assistance immediately if someone has been bitten by a snake. Responding quickly in this type of emergency is crucial. While waiting for emergency assistance:

- Wash the bite with soap and water
- Immobilize the bitten area and keep it lower than the level of the heart

If the victim is unable to reach medical care within 30 minutes, the American Red Cross recommends:

- Apply a bandage, wrapped two to four inches above the bite, to help slow the venom. This should not cut off the flow of blood from a vein or artery—the band should be loose enough to slip a finger under it.
- A suction device can be placed over the bite to help draw venom out of the wound without making cuts. These devices are often included in commercial snake bite kits.

### **How NOT to Treat a Snake Bite**

Though US medical professional may not agree on every aspect of what to do for snakebite first aid, they are nearly unanimous in their views of what not to do. Among their recommendations:

- No ice or any other type of cooling on the bite. Research has shown this to be potentially harmful.
- No tourniquets. This cuts blood flow completely and may result in loss of the affected limb.
- No incisions in the wound. Such measures have not been proven useful and may cause further injury.

### **Preventing Snake Bites**

Some bites, such as those inflicted when you accidentally step on a snake in the woods, are nearly impossible to prevent. However, there are precautions that can reduce your chances of being bitten by a snake. These include:

- Leave snakes alone. Many people are bitten because they try to kill a snake or get too close to it.
- Stay out of tall grass unless you wear thick leather boots and remain on hiking paths as much as possible.
- Keep hands and feet out of areas you cannot see. Do not pick up rocks or firewood unless you are out of a snake's striking distance.
- Be cautious and alert when climbing rocks.

Remember, a delay in seeking treatment from a snake bite may delay recovery and may even lead to the unthinkable, death.