

# Be Rattlesnake Safe



With the coming of spring and warmer weather conditions, snakes of many species are through hunkering down, making human encounters with these elusive creatures more likely. Although most native snakes are harmless, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) recommends steering clear of the venomous rattlesnake – and knowing what to do in the event of a strike.

Rattlesnakes are widespread in California and are found in a variety of habitat throughout the state from coastal to desert. They may also turn up around homes and yards in brushy areas and under wood piles. Generally not aggressive, rattlesnakes will likely retreat if given room or not deliberately provoked or threatened. Most bites occur when a rattlesnake is handled or accidentally touched by someone walking or climbing.

On rare occasions, rattlesnake bites have caused severe injury – even death. However, the potential of encountering a rattlesnake should not deter anyone from venturing outdoors. The California Poison Control System notes that the chances of being bitten are small compared to the risk of other environmental injuries. Most bites occur between the months of April and October when snakes and humans are most active outdoors, but there are precautions that can and should be taken to lessen the chances of being bitten.

## *The dos and don'ts in snake country*

- Be alert. Like all reptiles, rattlesnakes are sensitive to the ambient temperature and will adjust their behavior accordingly. After a cold or cool night, they will attempt to raise their body temperature by basking in the sun midmorning. To prevent overheating during hot days of spring and summer, they will become more active at dawn, dusk or night.

- Wear sturdy boots and loose-fitting long pants. Never go barefoot or wear sandals when walking through brushy, wild areas. Startled rattlesnakes may not rattle before striking defensively.
- When hiking, stick to well-used trails. Avoid tall grass, weeds and heavy underbrush where snakes may hide during the day. Never hike alone.
- Do not step or put your hands where you cannot see. Step ON logs and rocks, never over them, and be especially careful when climbing rocks or gathering firewood. Check out stumps or logs before sitting down, and shake out sleeping bags before use.
- Do not handle a freshly killed snake, as it can still inject venom.

## *What to do in the event of a snake bite*

Though uncommon, rattlesnake bites do occur, so have a plan in place for responding to any situation. Carry a cell phone, hike with a companion who can assist in an emergency and make sure that family or friends know where you are going and when you will be checking in. In the event of a bite:

- Stay calm but act quickly.
- Remove watches, rings, etc., which may constrict swelling.
- Transport the victim to the nearest medical facility.
- For more first aid information, please call the California Poison Control System at (800) 222-1222.

## *What you should NOT do after a rattlesnake bite*

- 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.