

Safety Newsletter

July, 2013

This Month's Topic: Snakebites

As summertime calls people and snakes alike to the outdoors, encounters with snakes become inevitable. California has an abundance of snakes, most of which are harmless. The exception is California's only native venomous snake - the rattlesnake.

Generally not aggressive, rattlesnakes strike when threatened or deliberately provoked, but given room they will retreat. Most snake bites occur when a rattlesnake is handled or accidentally touched by someone walking or climbing. The majority of snakebites occur on the hands, feet and ankles.

Rattlesnakes can cause serious injury to humans on rare occasions. The California Poison Control Center notes that rattlesnakes account for more than 800 bites each year with one to two deaths. Most bites occur between the months of April and October when snakes and humans are most active outdoors. About 25 percent of the bites are "dry," meaning no venom was injected, but the bites still require medical treatment.

Venomous Snakes

Outdoor workers in the United States may be exposed to many types of venomous snakes. Venomous U.S. snakes include rattlesnakes, copperheads, cottonmouths/water moccasins, and coral snakes.

Rattlesnakes are the largest of the venomous snakes in the United States. They can accurately strike at up to one-third their body length. Rattlesnakes use their rattles or tails as a warning when they feel threatened. Rattlesnakes may be found sunning themselves near logs, boulders, or open areas. These snakes may be found in most work habitats including the mountains, prairies, deserts, and beaches.

Symptoms

Signs or symptoms associated with a snake bite may vary depending on the type of snake, but may include:

- A pair of puncture marks at the wound
- Redness and swelling around the bite
- Severe pain at the site of the bite
- Nausea and vomiting
- Labored breathing (in extreme cases, breathing may stop altogether)
- Disturbed vision
- Increased salivation and sweating
- Numbness or tingling around your face and/or limbs

Recommendations for Protecting Workers

Employers should protect their workers from venomous snake bites by training them about:

- Their risk of exposure to venomous snakes
- How to identify venomous snakes
- How to prevent snake bites
- What they should do if they are bitten by a snake

OSHA Quick Card - Snakes

- Watch where you place your hands and feet when removing debris. If possible, don't place your fingers under debris you are moving. Wear heavy gloves.
- If you see a snake, step back and allow it to proceed.
- Wear boots at least 10 inches high.
- Watch for snakes sunning on fallen trees, limbs or other debris.
- A snake's striking distance is about 1/2 the total length of the snake.
- If bitten, note the color and shape of the snake's head to help with treatment.
- Keep bite victims still and calm to slow the spread of venom in case the snake is poisonous. Seek medical attention as soon as possible.
- Do not cut the wound or attempt to suck out the venom. Apply first aid: lay the person down so that the bite is below the level of the heart, and cover the bite with a clean, dry dressing.





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First Aid

Workers should take the following steps if they are bitten by a snake:

- Seek medical attention as soon as possible (dial 911 or call local Emergency Medical Services.)
- Try to remember the color and shape of the snake, which can help with treatment of the snake bite.
- Keep still and calm. This can slow down the spread of venom.
- Inform your supervisor.
- Apply first aid if you cannot get to the hospital right away.
 - Lay or sit down with the bite below the level of the heart.
 - Wash the bite with soap and water.
 - Cover the bite with a clean, dry dressing.

Do NOT do any of the following:

- Do not pick up the snake or try to trap it.
- Do not wait for symptoms to appear if bitten, seek immediate medical attention.
- Do not apply a tourniquet.
- Do not slash the wound with a knife.
- Do not suck out the venom.
- Do not apply ice or immerse the wound in water.
- Do not drink alcohol as a painkiller.
- Do not drink caffeinated beverages.
- Do not handle a freshly killed snake, it can still inject venom.

References

1. <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/snakes/>
2. <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/outdoor/#venomous>
3. http://www.osha.gov/Publications/rodents_snakes_insects.html
4. <http://www.dfg.ca.gov/news/issues/snake.html>

Fact Sheet & Statistics

- ✓ Each year, approximately 8,000 venomous snakebites occur in the United States. Between 1960 and 1990, no more than 12 fatalities from snake venom poisoning were reported annually. Most snakebites occur between April and October, when outdoor activities are popular.
- ✓ The six species of rattlesnakes found in California are not considered endangered or threatened. The California Department of Fish and Game Code classifies rattlesnakes as native reptiles. California residents can take rattlesnakes on private lands in any legal manner without a license or permit.
- ✓ Males had higher bite rates than females and Caucasians had higher rates than non-whites. Fifty percent of the cases were among children and young adults less than 20 years of age. Ninety-nine percent of the bites were on the extremities—65 percent on the upper extremities and 34 percent on the lower extremities.
- ✓ Rattlesnakes add to the diversity of our wildlife and are important members of our ecosystem; and should be left alone whenever possible, especially in wildland areas. Nonpoisonous snakes should be left alone wherever found.
- ✓ The recommended treatment of poisonous snakebites included incision and suction and the 3 A's (antivenin, antibiotics and antitetanus treatment).

"When face to face with a snake, always give them the right of way!"
 ■ Joel Agustin
 Engineering Support Supervisor, Alisto Engineering Group, Inc.



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