

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH AND SAFETY

Clover Safe notes are intended primarily for 4-H volunteers and members nine years and older

#51 POISONOUS SNAKEBITES



Southern Pacific Rattlesnake
Photograph Courtesy of Hopland REC

Poisonous snakes occur throughout California and are restricted to six species of rattlesnake: namely the Sidewinder, Speckled Rattlesnake, Red Diamond Rattlesnake, Southern Pacific Rattlesnake (also called Western Rattlesnake), Western Diamondback Rattlesnake, and Mojave Rattlesnake. There are about 7,000 to 8,000 poisonous snakebites annually in the United States. Of this total, 8 to 10 of the poisonous snakebites result in fatalities. Most snakebites occur on the limbs with the greatest percentage on the arms, hands, or fingers. About 30 percent of all snakebites occur while the snake is being purposefully handled.

The following precautions and actions are recommended to prevent and if necessary, treat poisonous snakebites:

- Avoid activities that involve walking or hiking alone in remote, overgrown, and/or exposed rock areas. Have a walking or hiking partner in areas where poisonous snakes are prevalent.
- Always wear sturdy hiking boots when walking or hiking outdoors. Do not wear sandals or sneakers.
- Avoid heavy underbrush where you cannot see what is in front of you. Stick to existing trails. When heavy underbrush is unavoidable, use a walking stick to first probe and rustle brush and grass that you intend to traverse.
- Learn to recognize poisonous snakes in the activity area by studying a reptile field guide or other similar snake identification materials.
- Be aware that rattlesnakes do not always shake their rattles before striking.
- Closely look for snakes before placing your hands on objects such as rock outcrops or trees or picking up objects from the ground (i.e. rocks, plants, leaves, flowers, etc.)
- Thoroughly inspect the area where you intend to sit, particularly around stumps, logs, boulders, or rock outcrops.
- Carefully examine the ground before crossing over or under fences and across logs and boulders.
- Never approach, tease, corner, or poke at any snake. If you encounter a rattlesnake, remain calm and back away slowly. Always give snakes plenty of room to escape from you.
- Consider baby poisonous snakes to be as venomous as fully grown poisonous snakes.
- Do not handle recently killed snakes. Although dead, a delayed nervous system reaction by the snake may cause it to bite.
- If a snakebite occurs: Calm the victim, wash the area of the bite with soap and water, apply a cold dressing over the bite area, immediately transport the victim to the closest medical facility for professional treatment, and notify your group leader, parent, or guardian. Also, remove jewelry, watches, and tight clothing in preparation for tissue swelling.
- The US Food and Drug Administration has recommended that poisonous snakebite treatments not include tourniquets, application of ice to the wound, or incisions to the snakebite with attempts to suck venom out of the affected area.

For additional information about poisonous snakes in California, see the Statewide Integrated Pest Management Program at: <http://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn74119.html> or the California Poison Control System at: <https://calpoison.org/topics/rattlesnakes>