

Copperheads, Cottonmouths and Rattlesnakes, Oh My!

The Southwest abounds with beautiful flowers, lush green lawns, vegetable gardens... and snakes. This area is home to many types of harmless, even helpful snakes. We also have our share of the venomous varieties: coral snakes, copperheads, cottonmouths (water moccasins), and rattlesnakes. As we tend our gardens and lawns, we need to remind ourselves to be on the lookout for snakes. Let's go over some quick tips to avoid snakebites.

Tips To Avoid Snakebites:

- Wear boots or high-top leather shoes when working in the garden, yard or woods. Remember, snake fangs are hollow and brittle. High-top shoes or boots usually offer very good protection. Flip-flops and sandals do not!
- Wear leather or heavy canvas gloves when weeding, moving firewood, or similar chores.
- Do not reach your hands into an area that you cannot see. Take it from me, I'll never forget reaching into a dimly lit hen's nest to gather eggs and feeling a cold pile of snake! It can make you hurt yourself!
- Be aware of potential hiding places when hiking, camping, gardening, or working in the yard.
- If you see a snake, just leave it alone! Often a snakebite occurs because someone tried to kill a snake, or pestered it to see what it would do.
- Don't handle recently killed snakes. Bites have occurred due to reflexes that were still present in the snake.

If, despite all your caution, you receive a snakebite:

- Remove any rings or constricting items because the affected area will quickly swell.
- Wash the bite area if possible, using lots of soap and water.
- Keep the affected area as still as possible because movement helps distribute venom.
- See a doctor immediately. Even the bite of a nonvenomous snake can cause a severe infection or an allergic reaction. Your doctor will decide upon an individualized treatment for you, which may include antibiotics, antivenin, and/or a tetanus booster.

While doctors may disagree on the best treatment, the Food and Drug Administration reports doctors are in agreement regarding what NOT to do:

- 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 electric shock. This method is under study and has yet to be proven effective. It could harm the victim.
- No incisions in the wound. Such measures have not been proven useful and may cause further injury.

Contrary to the popular statement “The only good snake is a dead snake,” they do help maintain the balance of nature. We would soon be overrun with rodents without those reptiles. Still, don’t let a chance encounter ruin your enjoyment of the great outdoors.

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