

Snake Safety

Tread carefully around these reptiles to avoid injury

Just as trails come in many different shapes and sizes, so do the creatures you might encounter along the way. Observing an insect or an animal in its own natural habitat can make for a memorable hiking experience. With just a little knowledge and some common sense, it can be a safe experience, too.

Snakes are one of the many fascinating creatures you might come across while hiking. Although the mere thought of snakes conjures up alarm in many hikers regardless of their skill or comfort level in the outdoors, most snakes mean no harm if they are not provoked or threatened. By taking a few simple precautions—such as by giving snakes a wide berth—most of the more than 75 million people that go hiking each year will never be bitten on the trail.

A trip into the woods need not be any more dangerous than a stroll through your own backyard. When blazing that next trail, just remember to respect the wildlife that you encounter.

Avoid Being Bitten

- Leave snakes alone. Most bites occur when people get too close or try to touch or kill a snake. Snakes can strike faster and farther than you might think – some nearly half their body length. If you see a snake in the wild, maintain a distance of at least 6 feet. If you accidentally step too close to a snake, take at least two giant steps backwards to get out of the snake's reach.
- Never touch a snake, even if you think it is dead. The fangs of a dead snake can still inject venom.
- Don't tread or step into places outdoors that you can't see. Don't pick up rocks or firewood unless you are out of a snake's striking distance. Be cautious and alert when climbing rocks. If you have to traverse a fallen log, step on the log and then down instead of just over. That way, you'll have a chance to see if you are about to step on a snake.
- Wearing boots and long pants when hiking may prevent snakebites. Stay out of tall grass unless you wear thick leather boots, and remain on hiking paths as much as possible. Chaps or gaiters further reduce the chance of a snakebite in tall grass.



If you get bitten:

- Call 911 or go to the closest emergency department if you are unsure about the type of snake that bit you.
- Stay calm and cool. Minimize activity if possible. However, if you are alone in the wilderness or far from access to medical care, you may have to hike out to the nearest phone/cell phone signal or roadway for help.
- Don't do anything to the place you were bitten—you might make it worse. If you are bitten on the arm or hand, remove any constricting clothing, rings, bracelets, etc. in case your arm swells.
- Avoid further injury by staying away from the snake. There is little value in trying to capture or identify the snake. If someone in your party can take a photo while staying a good distance away, that could be helpful.
- Keep the bite below the level of the heart. Do not elevate.

Do NOT:

- Do not try to suck the venom out with your mouth or suction device. That might lead to an infection. Also, don't try to let the venom "bleed out" by cutting marks on the bite with a blade.
- Do not apply a constriction band or tourniquet with a belt or rope as that will cut off the circulation.
- Do not drink any alcohol or take aspirin after a snakebite. Both thin your blood, which is also what the snake venom does. Do not apply either hot or cold packs.

Most snakes are harmless and the majority of snakebites are not fatal. Usually a snakebite results in only minor injury. Very few people are actually at risk of even encountering a snake with venom powerful enough to kill. However, people with underlying health problems may be at greater risk even when facing a non-lethal snake, so be sure to see a doctor just in case.

