

Snake Bites

Virginia is home to thirty different species of snakes. Most are beneficial to people and to the environment because their diet includes pests such as rodents and insects. Countless snakes are needlessly killed every year because they are considered “poisonous” and dangerous, when in fact, most are harmless.

There are only three species of poisonous snakes in Virginia. The most common, the *copperhead*, is found statewide. The *cottonmouth*, or *water moccasin*, lives near water and only in the southeastern corner of Virginia. Two types of **rattlesnakes** live in the state. Timber rattlesnakes are found in the western, mountainous portion of the state. Canebrake rattlesnakes, a state endangered species, live only near the Dismal Swamp. All of these snakes are in the pit viper “family”: they have a heat-sensing pit located between the eye and nostril.

Symptoms

A bite from one of Virginia’s pit vipers may cause rapid onset of these symptoms:

- ❖ Immediate pain which tends to get worse over time
- ❖ Steadily increasing swelling, often involving the entire bitten extremity
- ❖ The skin around the bite site becomes discolored, looking like a bruise

Sometimes the victim will also complain of a metallic taste, nausea, faintness, sweating, and tingling around the lips.

First Aid for Snakebite



Poison Centers recommend the following first aid actions:

- ❖ Keep the snake bite victim calm and at rest
- ❖ Wash the site well with soap and water
- ❖ Remove any tight clothing or jewelry on the extremity that was bitten
- ❖ Position the extremity at the level of the heart, or slightly elevated
- ❖ Do NOT apply tourniquet, do NOT apply ice and do NOT attempt to cut the skin or suck the venom out
- ❖ Call the poison center immediately for more treatment advice

Avoiding Snakebite

Snakes are generally secretive and nonaggressive, so preventing snakebite requires only common sense actions. Recognize snake habitat: brushy, wooded, overgrown or rocky areas create protective cover where snakes can hide from predators and where they seek their prey. When in these areas look carefully before putting your feet down, or placing your hand near any hiding spot. Wear leather ankle-high boots when walking in snake habitat. If you do see a snake,



simply move slowly away from it. Teach children to respect snakes and to NEVER try to touch ANY wild animal.



The Department of Game and Inland Fisheries publishes an excellent booklet with color photographs of all of Virginia's native snake species, and information on their habitats and distribution. You can contact them in Richmond at (804) 367-1000 to request a copy of this informative brochure.

Facts About Virginia Snakes

Few creatures are as hated and feared as the snake. Many people have a strong fearful reaction even to pictures of snakes. Learning facts about these animals may be helpful in developing a more realistic understanding of the relatively low risk they pose to humans.

- ❖ Snakebite is not a significant cause of death in the United States. There have been only 2 deaths from snakebite in Virginia in the last twenty years.
- ❖ Not every bite from a poisonous snake will result in the release of venom into the victim: nearly 25% of the bites are “dry”.
- ❖ The venom of a young snake is identical to that of the adult snake, so a bite from a baby snake can be just as dangerous as from a fully-grown snake.
- ❖ Sometimes people try to capture a snake that has bitten someone, thinking that the doctor will need to see it in order to treat the victim. It is not necessary to capture or identify the snake if someone is bitten. The same antivenom would be used to treat a serious bite from any of Virginia's poisonous snakes.
- ❖ The easiest way to recognize a poisonous snake is by noticing the shape of the pupil of its eye. Pit vipers have elliptical-shaped pupils, like a cat. The non-poisonous snakes of Virginia all have round pupils, like humans.



For more information on poisons and poison prevention, please send a self-addressed stamped envelope to:



Virginia Poison Center
VCU Medical Center
PO Box 980522
Richmond, VA 23298
(804) 828-4780 (business line)

