If You Are Bitten by a Rattlesnake

The most important thing to do in case of a rattlesnake bite is to stay calm and get to the nearest medical facility as quickly as possible.

- Move away from the snake to avoid further bites.
- Gently wash the bite area with soap and water if available.
- Remove any watches, rings, etc. that may constrict during swelling.
- Apply a cold, wet cloth over the bite if possible.
- Remove or loosen tight or restrictive clothing around the bitten limb.
- Hold the limb in a comfortable position slightly lower than your heart.
- Go to the nearest emergency facility as quickly as possible. A rattlesnake bite is to stay calm and get to the nearest medical facility as quickly as possible (do not speed or drive recklessly, this may cause an accident that is more dangerous than the bite). If possible, the victim should lie quietly in the vehicle while someone else drives.

DON’T apply a tourniquet.

DON’T pack the bite area in ice or ice water.

DON’T cut the wound with a knife or razor.

DON’T suck out the venom by mouth.

DON’T drink alcohol.

DON’T apply electrical shock to bite area. This is an anecdotal and unsubstantiated treatment.

By following the suggested precautions, and knowing the proper responses to snake encounters, visitors can ensure that open space is safe for themselves and for the myriad of interesting and important snakes that inhabit the preserves.

For more information about snakes in California, visit the California Reptiles and Amphibians Web site: www.californiherps.com.

Emergency Contact Information

In the event that you experience an emergency on District lands (fire, accident, or other immediate threat to life or property), call 911 or contact the District’s 24-hour emergency dispatch number for District rangers at 650-968-4411. This phone number is for emergency use only; for any other District business call the District’s administrative office at 650-691-1200. This number is answered weekdays during regular business hours, and voice mail is available outside of regular hours.

For Further Information

For further information, please call, write, or visit the District: Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District, 330 Distel Circle, Los Altos, CA 94022-1404. The telephone number is 650-691-1200, email may be sent to info@openspace.org, or visit www.openspace.org.

Sources:


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Snakes are ectothermic (cold-blooded) and move between sun and shade to maintain a stable temperature. In northern California, snakes become dormant during the colder, winter months. This is not hibernation in the same sense that mammals like bears hibernate, but it is a slowing of physiological activity. Some snakes spend their dormant period alone, but others den together in large groups.

Some snakes use venom to subdue their prey while they eat, however, most snakes are not venomous. The northern Pacific rattlesnake (a subspecies of Western rattlesnake) is the only venomous snake found in Northern California.

**Northern Pacific Rattlesnake**
*Crotalus viridis oreganus*

Northern Pacific rattlesnakes can be found from sea-level at the Pacific Ocean to 11,000 feet in the Sierra Nevada mountains. They are most active in spring and fall, and in the morning and evening (or at night in warm weather). In cool weather or in the evening, rattlesnakes will bask on logs or in warm weather). In cool weather or in the morning and evening (or at night). They are shy animals and avoid contact with humans. Given the opportunity, they will retreat when confronted by humans. Most snake bites occur when a snake is intentionally or accidentally touched.

**How Do I Know It’s a Rattlesnake?**

Northern Pacific rattlesnakes are often smaller than snakes you’ve seen on television. They average less than 3 feet long, though 5-foot snakes have been found. They have thick bodies and blunt tails with distinctive rattles. Rattlesnakes can lose their rattles, however, so don’t rely on seeing rattles for identification.

Northern Pacific rattlesnakes usually have large, squarish blotches along their backs, against a main body-color of brown, gray, or olive-green, and black and white bands right before the rattle. *Viridis*, the species name, Rattlesnake rattle means ‘green’ in Latin, and comes from the snake’s distinctive green cast. Rattlesnakes have wide variations in color and pattern; check other traits to positively identify a rattlesnake.

More useful in identification is the shape of the head. Rattlesnakes have a wide, triangular head, much wider at the back than the front, and a distinct, thin ‘neck’ area. Non-poisonous snakes in California have heads the same width as their bodies, with no discernable ‘neck’ region.

Non-venomous gopher snakes are often mistaken for rattlesnakes. Gopher snakes have wide variations in color and pattern; check other traits to positively identify a rattlesnake.

In the United States each year, an average of 800 people are bitten by rattlesnakes. Of those, only one or two die. More people are killed by bee and wasp stings than rattlesnake bites.

**How to Avoid Rattlesnakes and Rattlesnake Bites**

Rattlesnakes are active spring through fall in California. In warmer weather, you are more likely to encounter rattlesnakes under rocks, ledges, or logs. In cooler weather, watch out for them on top of rocks and logs.

If a rattlesnake senses your approach and has an avenue of escape, it will leave the area, probably before you ever see it. Startling a snake is the way most people get bitten. If the snake cannot escape, it will flatten its body and head, and rattle its tail to give you warning. Should you encounter a rattlesnake, or hear its warning rattle, stand still until you have located the snake, then walk away from it calmly. Rattlesnakes cannot crawl as fast as you can walk, and you should have no trouble leaving the area. Though rattlesnakes can strike in a split second, they can only strike within a distance of one to two and a half feet.

There is some truth to the old saying: “The first one over the log wakes it up, the second one makes it mad, the third one gets bitten.” EVERY open space preserve visitor should look before reaching or stepping.

The following tips can help you avoid snakes, and protect yourself:

- Wear hiking boots.
- Stay on paths and trails. Avoid tall grass, weeds, and brush where snakes may hide.
- Look for concealed snakes before picking up rocks, sticks, or firewood.
- Check carefully around stumps or logs before sitting down.
- Step on logs and rocks—not over them.
- When climbing, look before placing your hands. Snakes climb walls, trees, and rocks.
- Keep hands and feet out of areas you can’t see, such as holes, or piles of rocks or brush.
- Consider using a walking stick when hiking. If you encounter a snake it may strike the stick instead of you.
- Walk heavily, snakes may sense the ground vibration from your footsteps and leave the area.
- Baby rattlesnakes are poisonous and do bite.
- Don’t handle a dead snake; if it was recently killed you can still be bitten as a result of a reflex response.
- Don’t tease a snake.
- Teach children to respect snakes and to leave them alone.
- Give rattlesnakes the right-of-way.

Visitor and staff safety is a priority for the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District. Snakes play an essential role in natural systems on the preserves, and because of the risk to visitors, visitors should not kill or attempt to move snakes of any type. If you are concerned about a snake you have encountered on District land, please call the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District at (650) 691-1200, and staff will carefully review the situation to determine whether relocation or other action should be taken.