

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. Before blazing that next trail, please remember to respect the wildlife that you encounter, and don't forget to read through our Q&A below for more information on snake safety in the outdoors.

Q: How can I avoid being bitten by a snake?

A: Some bites, such as those inflicted when snakes are accidentally stepped on or encountered in wilderness settings, are difficult to prevent. But a few simple precautions can lower the risk of 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--about 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 reach or step into places outdoors that you can't see. Keep hands and feet out of areas 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.
- * Wearing boots and long pants when hiking may help 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 may further reduce the chance of a snakebite in tall grass.

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Q:

What if I am bitten?

A:

Despite the best precautions, sometimes a person will get bitten. If you are bitten:

- * Call 911 or go to the closest emergency department.
- * 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 or radio for help.
- * Don't do anything to the place you were bitten—you might make things worse.
- * If you are bitten on the arm or hand, take off your rings, bracelets or watch in case your arm swells. Also remove any tight-fitting clothes around the bite area.
- * Avoid further injury by staying away from the snake.
There is no value in trying to capture or identify the snake.
- * Mark the leading edge of swelling (and record the time) to gauge the progression of swelling.
- * Before going on any hike, always let someone know where you will be and for how long. In the event of an accident on the trail, these precautions can significantly shorten response time.
- * Make sure you carry plenty of water in your day pack.

In addition, there are several things you should not do:

- * Do not try to suck the venom out of the bite with your mouth or suction device.
- * Do not cut into or incise bite marks with a blade.
- * Do not apply a narrow, constrictive tourniquet such as a belt, necktie or cord.
- * Do not waste time or take any risks trying to kill, bag or bring in offending snake.
- * Digital or Polaroid images may be helpful if they can be obtained quickly and safely.
- * Do not drink any alcohol or take aspirin or ibuprofen after snakebite.
- * Do not place ice directly on the wound.
- * Do not apply either hot or cold packs.
- * Do not use a stun gun or electric shock of any kind.
- * Do not engage in strenuous physical activity if possible.
- * Antivenom is not recommended for field use.

Q:

Are all snakes venomous?

A:

Most snakes are harmless and the majority of snakebites are not fatal. Sometimes snakebites result in only minor injury. However, it is not possible to predict which bites will result in mild symptoms and which can more seriously harm or kill you. Therefore, all patients with snakebites should seek prompt medical attention at a hospital.

Of the estimated 45,000 snakebites each year in the United States, approximately 7,000 to 8,000 involve venomous species, leading to fewer than half a dozen deaths per year. To put this into perspective, over 75 million people go hiking each year—so you can see that the risk of snakebite, especially by a venomous snake, is fairly uncommon, particularly for people who take proper precautions and set out to avoid snakes.

Serious injury and disability can result from a snakebite, such as the loss of a finger or the loss of movement at a joint. However, by following the simple guidelines provided above, you can significantly reduce your risk of a bite or injury.



This fact sheet was created by the American Hiking Society with the help of Dr. Sean Bush, Staff Emergency Physician and Envenomation Specialist, Loma Linda University Medical Center. Materials contained in this fact sheet are for informational purposes and are not intended to be a sole or complete point of reference for preparedness and safety in the outdoors.