



# Rattlesnake Awareness

## Be rattlesnake safe

Q&A with wildlife biologist and educator Mike Cardwell and William Hayes, professor of earth & biological sciences, Loma Linda University



### What types of rattlesnakes live in our area?

In the Victorville area, the Mojave Rattlesnake and Sidewinder are common in the desert, the Southern Pacific Rattlesnake occurs in more densely vegetated areas to the south and the Speckled Rattlesnake is often found in rocky areas to the east. In the Palm Springs area, Sidewinders are prevalent in the desert, but Red Diamond, Southern Pacific and Speckled rattlesnakes occur near and in the foothills. Western Diamondbacks occupy the desert to the east. West of Cabazon in Riverside County, the Southern Pacific, Red Diamond and Speckled rattlesnakes are dominant.

### How does weather affect rattlesnakes?

In our region, all rattlesnakes are inactive in winter, although they may come out briefly during warm spells. In mountainous areas, rattlesnakes may be inactive for as long as six months during winter.

In very hot weather, rattlesnakes are mostly nocturnal and may be seen only in the early morning or evening. When inactive, most rattlesnakes seek cover in crevices of rocks, under surface objects, beneath dense vegetation and in rodent burrows.

In years when there is ample rainfall and vigorous vegetation, there also will be an increase in voles, mice and ground squirrels, which are the rattlesnakes' prey. As a result, there may be more snakes around, as well.

### Describe the life cycle of rattlesnakes.

Rattlesnakes mate in both spring and fall and the females give birth to live young in the fall. During mating season, male rattlesnakes roam through a wide area in search of females, so they may be seen more often during that period. For that reason, spring and fall are also the times during which the most snakebites are reported.

Baby rattlesnakes are venomous at birth and initially too small to eat most rodents, so they eat a lot of small lizards. Contrary to myth, the bite of baby rattlesnakes is less lethal than that of adults because they have so little venom.

### What should people do to be safe in rattlesnake areas?

This is summed up with two rules:

- ◆ When you are in snake country, don't put your unprotected hands or feet any place without first looking to see what's there.
- ◆ Leave rattlesnakes alone when you find them. Stay at least twice the length of the snake away from rattlesnakes.

### How can we keep rattlesnakes out of our yard?

The most effective thing to do is to eliminate places where snakes and rodents can hide. Keep grass trimmed very short. Trim shrubs so you can see the bare ground under them. Build a rack to keep firewood eight or so inches off the ground. Don't use bird feeders. They attract rodents and rodents attract rattlesnakes. Cover openings to drain pipes and crawlspaces under sheds with screen or hardware cloth.

You will find female rattlesnakes where there are resources like food and shelter and you find males where there are females. Female rattlesnakes don't move around nearly as much as males and a clean, tidy yard with nothing to eat and no place to hide is not likely to attract them.

Rattlesnakes are an important part of the ecosystem. They are cognitive creatures and should not be killed just because they are in your yard. Not only do they eat a lot of rodents, but they themselves are also food for other animals, such as bobcats and eagles. So, if you see a rattlesnake in your yard, just let it be. It will eventually leave. Or, if you cannot do that, remove the snake carefully in a bucket or trash can and release it elsewhere. Or call a professional relocation service.

### What should a person do if he or she is bitten?

Head for the nearest emergency room right away. Your best snakebite kit is your cell phone or car keys. The only thing that can improve the outcome of a serious rattlesnake bite is antivenom, which is only available in hospitals.

None of the old first aid practices are effective, some actually do damage and all waste time. Serious rattlesnake bites destroy tissue and doctors who treat a lot of bites are fond of saying that "time is tissue." In other words, antivenom cannot repair damage, it can only neutralize venom that has not yet caused damage. Waiting to see if serious symptoms set in is not wise.



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## Rattlesnake safety tips

From the University of California Statewide Integrated Pest Management Program

Hands, feet and ankles are the most common sites for rattlesnake bites. Using some common-sense rules can prevent most snake bites.

- ◆ Never go barefoot or wear sandals when walking in areas where you cannot clearly see where you are placing your feet. Always wear hiking boots.
- ◆ Always stay on paths. Avoid tall grass, weeds and heavy underbrush where snakes may be present.
- ◆ Always look for concealed snakes before picking up rocks, sticks or firewood.
- ◆ Always check carefully around stumps or logs before sitting.
- ◆ When climbing, always look before putting your hands in a new location. Snakes are frequently found at high altitudes.
- ◆ Never grab what appear to be sticks or branches while swimming; rattlesnakes are excellent swimmers.
- ◆ Baby rattlesnakes are venomous! They can and do bite. Leave them alone.
- ◆ Never hike alone. Always have a buddy to help in case of an emergency. Learn basic lifesaving skills.
- ◆ Never handle freshly killed snakes. You may still be bitten.
- ◆ Never tease a snake to see how far it can strike. You can be several feet from the snake and still be within striking distance.
- ◆ Teach children to respect snakes and to leave them alone. Curious children who pick up snakes are frequently bitten.
- ◆ Always give snakes the right of way!

## Protect your pet from rattlesnakes

- ◆ Whenever you are in any wild area where snakes are likely to live, your first line of defense should be to keep your dog on a leash and keep an eye on where it is sniffing. .
- ◆ Make your yard unfriendly to snakes by removing places they can hide.
- ◆ Clear away anything that may attract the rodents that snakes hunt. Remove bird feeders, pick up ripe fruit that falls from trees, enclose compost piles and keep yard clear of debris that rodents might find attractive for nesting..
- ◆ Consider rattlesnake aversion training. This is done by professional trainers and involves placing a shock collar on the dog, then giving him a mild electric shock while simultaneously exposing him to a tethered rattlesnake. One highly regarded aversion training company is Natural Solutions Wildlife Enterprises.
- ◆ A rattlesnake vaccine is available for dogs. However, it may not be effective, depending on the type of rattlesnake that bit your dog. (It would be most effective for Red Diamond Rattlesnakes if they are in your area).
- ◆ Contact your local veterinarian in advance and find out the nearest veterinary hospital with facilities to treat snakebite. Keep that information close at hand in case your pet is bitten.

### What if, despite your best efforts, your dog is bitten?

- ◆ Call your local veterinarian.
- ◆ Keep your pet calm.
- ◆ Do not offer food, water or medications. This can make matters worse.
- ◆ Benadryl is NOT an effective medication and should be avoided!
- ◆ Remove collar. Use a slip lead if needed instead.
- ◆ Immediately take your pet to get help. Do not wait for symptoms to develop.

Wounds vary widely in severity. The amount and type of venom differs with each situation, and some rattlesnake bites (up to 25 percent) deliver no venom at all. Consult a veterinarian immediately.

### For further information:

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Statewide Integrated Pest Management Program <https://ipm.ucanr.edu/home-and-landscape/rattlesnakes/pest-notes/#gsc.tab=0>



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