



Prevent Poisoning: Tips from the Blue Ridge Poison Center

SNAKES

Nationwide there are about 3,000 venomous snake bites reported each year. However, on average only a few of those bites results in a death. *Snake bites are preventable and treatable.*



Copperhead. Young copperheads may have a yellow tail, which fades as the snake matures.

How many snakes in Virginia are dangerous?

There are about 30 species of snakes in Virginia. All of them play an important role in controlling rodent pests, which are more likely than snakes to spread disease and damage property. Most snake species are harmless to people and pets. Three Virginia species, however, are *venomous*, meaning they can inject poisonous venom into their victim through a pair of hollow, needle-like fangs. All 3 of Virginia's venomous species—the **copperhead**, the **timber rattlesnake**, and the **water moccasin** (also known as the **cottonmouth**)—are members of the *pit viper family*. Pit vipers have a heat-sensing pit on each side of their head which helps them locate prey.



Timber rattlesnakes are a state endangered species

Where do venomous snakes live?

The copperhead is the most common venomous snake in Virginia. They prefer to live in places where they can hide and find lots of food, such as a forest or areas with tall grass. But copperheads have been found in urban areas, too. Timber rattlesnakes are common only in the mountainous regions of the state, and a small area of the southeastern part of Virginia where they are known as *canebrake rattlesnakes*. Water moccasins are found only in the extreme southeastern tip of the state, and prefer brackish, marshy areas.



Water moccasin or cottonmouth.

How can you tell if a snake is venomous?

In addition to their heat-sensing pits, all pit vipers have triangular, spade-shaped heads instead of narrow, oval heads. Pit vipers also have elliptical pupils (like a cat's eye) instead of round pupils. The images at left show the markings of each of our venomous species. Experts warn, however, that colors and patterns can differ depending on the snake's age, health, when it last shed its skin, and natural variations. The VA Herpetological Society has excellent snake identification information on its website (www.virginiaherpetologicalsociety.com). Note: it's best to leave any snake alone, whether you think it's venomous or not.



What happens if a venomous snake bites you?

Venom destroys blood cells, blood vessels, and other tissues. Snakes use venom to help paralyze and digest their prey. They also use venom to protect themselves. If you are bitten by one of Virginia's venomous snakes, you may experience some of these symptoms:

- Intense pain spreading out from the bite
- Puncture wounds from fangs
- Swelling and bruising (may become severe)
- Sweating
- Weakness, dizziness
- Nausea and vomiting
- Muscle twitching

What should you do if someone is bitten?

Remember: Snake bites are treatable. Stay calm! *The most important goal is to get the victim to a health care facility*, where they can have access to medical care and antivenom if needed. If possible, wash the bite with soap and water. Swelling is likely, so remove constrictive items like jewelry or tight clothing near the bite.



Most important item
in your snake bite kit!

Snake bite? DON'T DO THIS:

There are many unfounded myths, worthless folk remedies, and just plain bad advice out there about treating snake bites. Don't believe everything you see in the movies! The actions below have not been shown to improve a victim's outcome and in fact *may cause more harm*:

- **Do not** use any form of suction.
- **Do not** give the victim an electric shock.
- **Do not** give the victim any drugs or alcohol.
- **Do not** apply a tourniquet.
- **Do not** apply ice or use an ice bath.
- **Do not** cut the wound.

Snake bite prevention is simple. Snakes do not want to bite you, and will always try to get away from you first if given the chance. Watch where you put your hands and feet outdoors. Wear long pants and shoes when in tall grass or other snake habitats. Walk with a flashlight outdoors at night. And if you see a snake, just admire it from a distance. If someone is bitten, doctors do NOT need to see the snake in order to treat you. Don't try to kill it, capture it, or take its picture.

For help with any suspected poisoning or overdose.
1-800-222-1222 or www.poisonhelp.org.
Fast, free, private.



The **Blue Ridge Poison Center** at University of Virginia Health has been proudly serving Virginia since 1978. Visit our website for flyers, poisoning prevention news, tips, and more: www.brpc.virginia.edu. Please share this flyer!