Rattlesnakes

Living in Southern California means sunny skies, warm temperatures, and lots of open space. Such a climate also means living with rattlesnakes. While the idea of sharing being anywhere near a snake strikes fear in many people, it is possible to co-exist. The more you know about snakes, the better prepared you will be for any potential encounters.

How Can Rattlesnakes Be Identified?

Rattlesnakes have a powerful body, thin neck, and a well-defined triangular or arrow-shaped head. Using the snake's color or pattern is NOT a reliable method of identification. Looking for the characteristic rattle on the tail is a good method, but sometimes these rattles are lost. In comparison, a non-poisonous snake tends to look more like a snake a child rolls out of clay: the head, neck and body have more-or-less the same diameter. They do not share the distinct skinny neck of the rattlesnake. *(Please note: This is true only of snakes native to California and does not apply to exotic snakes or snakes imported into California from elsewhere.)*



What Types of Snakes Are Common in San Diego County?

There are four species of rattlesnakes found in San Diego County. The most common species is the Southern Pacific rattlesnake, which can be found in prairie or sage scrub areas as well as housing developments, parks, and even the beach.



The Red Diamond rattlesnake is the largest species in the county. Unlike the Southern Pacific, they prefer to live away from developed areas. However, as communities spread into open land, sightings are becoming more common.



Southwestern Speckled rattlesnakes are very shy and avoid populated areas, making them the least common species to be seen in Southern California.



Found only in the desert, the Colorado Desert Sidewinder is the smallest species in the area. These snakes have not been found living within our immediate area, but keep an eye out for them when traveling to the desert.

We have non-poisonous snakes as well. The Pacific Gopher snake and the common Bull snake have markings that are similar to a rattlesnake. These rattlesnake-like markings are a protective defense against enemies. But neither the Gopher Snake nor the Bull snake has the distinctive skinny neck that a rattler has. Bull snakes and Gopher snakes can cause a painful bite but they are not dangerous like a rattlesnake.

What If I See a Snake?

If you see a snake, the best thing to do is leave it alone! Do not attempt to touch it or pick it up. Look around the area to make sure there are no other snakes and calmly walk away. If you are in an open or wilderness area, let the snake be. That is its home. If the snake is near your house, especially if you have children or animals, you can call your local fire department or animal control agency to come and remove the snake for you. If you live within the Rancho Santa Fe Fire Protection District, or any other community serviced by North County Dispatch, you can call the non-emergency dispatch number at **858-756-1126** and they will send help your way.

What Can Be Done to Prevent A Bite?

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

- Never go barefooted or wear sandals when walking in the rough.
- Always stay on paths. Avoid tall grass, weeds and heavy underbrush.
- Always look for concealed snakes before picking up rocks, sticks or firewood.
- Always check carefully around stumps or logs before sitting.
- When climbing, look before putting your hands in a new location. Snakes can climb walls, trees and rocks and are frequently found at high altitudes.
- Never grab "sticks" or "branches" while swimming. Rattlesnakes are excellent swimmers!
- Teach children to respect snakes and to leave snakes alone. Curious children who pick up snakes are frequently bitten.
- Always give snakes the right of way!

What If Someone Is Bitten?

A snakebite emergency plan should be developed before it is needed. If you are less than one hour from the nearest emergency room, initial treatment is relatively simple:

- Call 9-1-1
- Try to calm the victim.
- Gently wash the area with soap and water.
- Apply a cold, wet cloth over the bite.

There are several things that should NOT be done as they will not help and can actually be even more dangerous to the victim:

- DO NOT apply a tourniquet.
- DO NOT pack the bite area in ice.
- DO NOT cut the wound with a knife or razor.
- DO NOT use your mouth to suck out the venom.
- DO NOT let the victim drink alcohol.



If you are more than one hour from an emergency facility, your emergency snakebite plan becomes more complicated. You need to know the following information:

- Where is the nearest hospital emergency room?
- How long will it take 9-1-1 emergency responders to arrive on the scene?
- How close will you be to a fire department, park ranger, highway patrol, Sheriff or Coast Guard station?

In addition, it is always a good idea to:

- Hike or camp with a buddy who will be able to go for help.
- Take along a portable phone.
- Notify people where you will be and check in with them.

If a rattlesnake injects venom into the wound, a variety of symptoms develop: swelling, pain, bleeding at the site, nausea, vomiting, sweating, chills, dizziness, weakness, numbness or tingling of the mouth or tongue, and changes in the heart rate and blood pressure. Other symptoms can include excessive salivation, thirst, swollen eyelids, blurred vision, muscle spasms and unconsciousness. Rattlesnake venom also interferes with the ability of the blood to clot properly. Severe symptoms can be life-threatening and must be treated with antivenin, which is given intravenously with fluids.

Nationwide, there are over 800 cases of rattlesnake bites reported annually to the American Association of Poison Control Centers. Of these reported bites, only one to two cases per year result in death of the patient. However, the majority of rattlesnake bites are successfully treated with as little as two to three days of hospitalization.

Photos courtesy of Gary Naftis and www.CaliforniaHerps.com.