



NEWS RELEASE

ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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Take precautions to avoid snake bites

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Flooding caused by Hurricane Ivan may drive some snakes to seek shelter above water level in buildings, cars and other areas where they are not normally found. To avoid being bitten, the Alabama Department of Public Health recommends the following:

- When entering any area, use caution. Use a stick or some type of rod to move objects slowly and carefully to check for anything hidden behind them.
- If possible, wear boots and heavy gloves when clearing an area and work with someone else.
- Make noise when entering an area to alert snakes to your presence and to cause them to make a sound or movement that will tell you their location.
- Be especially cautious when cleaning up swimming pools, particularly with pool skimmers where snakes can hide among the leaves.
- Snakes will not usually bite unless cornered, handled or stepped on, and most snakes are not poisonous. If you find a snake, it is best to leave it alone. Snakes will return to their own environment away from humans as quickly as they can. Snakes help keep the rodent population down, so it is best not to kill them unless absolutely necessary.
- If you must kill a snake, one of the most effective methods is to use a long-handled hoe to strike it in the back of the head.
- Be sure to warn children to watch out for snakes and not to get close to them. Tell them it is best to back off quickly and quietly from a snake to avoid making it feel threatened.

In the event of snake bite, seek medical help immediately and follow these general guidelines:

- Try to stay as calm as possible. The victim should be made to lie still and keep the bitten area still.
- The victim should try to remember what the snake looks like, but should not try to kill it. This is because the snake bite victim should stay as still as possible to slow the movement of the poison from the bite to other parts of the body. If someone else can kill the snake, it should be saved for identification by medical personnel.
- If possible, victims should be carried to medical help or have help brought to them. A bite victim should walk only if necessary and then very slowly.

- Symptoms of poisonous snake bites vary, but for rattlesnakes, cottonmouths, and copperheads, symptoms include severe pain, rapid swelling at the wound site, weakness, nausea and vomiting, blurred vision, breathing difficulty, convulsions and shock.

The symptoms of a coral snake bite differ in that there is slight pain and swelling at the bite site and the victim may experience difficulty in speaking, drooping eyelids, heavy sweating and drooling, drowsiness and paralysis in addition to nausea, blurred vision and vomiting.

- Absence of distinct fang punctures and failure of local pain, swelling, numbness or weakness to appear within 20 minutes are strong evidence against snake venom poisoning.
- If the victim is not breathing, try to restore breathing. Call 911 and seek medical care for any snake bite.
- Put a loose splint on any extremity that has been bitten.
- Keep a bitten extremity below heart level.
- Remove any jewelry or tight-fitting clothes above the bitten area.
- Use a pen to mark above the area of swelling every 15 minutes to monitor progression.
- Keep the patient calm and still, but if necessary the patient can walk to get transportation or seek care.
- Unless used properly, tourniquets may do more harm than good. If you tie anything above the bite area to prevent the spread of the poison, you should be able to slip two fingers under what you have used as a tourniquet. If the area under the tourniquet swells, move the tourniquet two to four inches above where you first placed it. **If it is a coral snake bite, DO NOT use a tourniquet.**
- Never use cold or ice compresses on the victim. The cold may damage the tissue.
- Do not give the victim ANY food, drink or alcoholic beverages.
- Even if the snake bite is believed to be non-poisonous, medical help should be sought and a tetanus shot may be required.

Four types of poisonous snakes live in Alabama and may be identified as follows:

The **copperhead** has a bright copper-colored head. The **cottonmouth or water moccasin** swims with the head and neck high above water. Other snakes don't do this. The **coral** snake has red and black rings always divided by narrow yellow rings. The phrase to remember this is: "Red on yellow will kill a fellow, red on black venom lack." Finally, the **rattlesnake** lifts its tail and makes a rattling sound with the horny shells on the end of the tail.

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