Snake Bite: First Aid

The primary purpose of the rattlesnake’s venomous bite is to assist the reptile in securing its prey. After using its specialized senses to find its next meal, the rattlesnake injects its victim with a fatal dose of venom.

To prevent being bitten, the best advice is to leave snakes alone. Most bites occur when someone is trying to pick up a snake, tease it, or kill it. If snakes are provided an escape route, they’ll escape rather than strike. But if someone is bitten, the following first aid is suggested.

1. Remain Calm
2. Immobilize the Bitten Extremity
   Do not apply a tourniquet or constriction band. Do not apply ice to the wound. Do not attempt to cut the wound or suck out the venom.
3. Wash the Skin
   If soap and water are available, wash the skin over the bite or use an antiseptic wipe.
4. Remove Jewelry and Tight Fitting Clothing in Case of Swelling
5. Call for Help
   If possible, send someone to telephone 911. If alone, walk at a relaxed pace to the closest telephone and call 911. Get medical attention as soon as possible.
The Tongue: A Vital Part of Smell

By flicking its forked tongue, the rattlesnake constantly "tastes" the smell of the air. When the snake pulls its tongue back in, it slides the tips into cavities on the roof of the mouth. These organs, called Jacobson's Organs, contain branches of the olfactory nerve, the same nerve that leads to the nose. No wonder they have such a keen sense of smell: when the snake flicks its tongue into the air, picks up a scent, and then stimulates the olfactory nerve, in effect it is extending its nose beyond its body.

The Pit Organs: A Second Set of Eyes

When a rattlesnake looks at a mouse in the daylight, it senses both the reflected visual light that a human would see and the infrared light given off by the mouse's body heat. In total darkness, the rattlesnake can still find its prey by "seeing" only the mouse's body heat. How does it do this?

In pit vipers, though, these nerves are confined to the pit organs. These nerves are different from yours in that they're linked to the vision center of the snake's brain. You could almost call the rattlesnake a heat-seeking missile, guided by a highly specialized nervous system.

The Eyes: Vision in Dim Light

The rattlesnake's pupil is a narrow vertical slit, like those in a cat's eye. This type of pupil generally indicates an eye that is highly sensitive to vision in dim light. That's also true for a rattlesnake.

The Scales: A Keeled Mystery

If you encountered a snake and its tail was hidden from view, you might recognize it as a rattlesnake by its overall shape: large triangular head, narrow neck and wide body. The rattlesnake can also be identified by looking only at its back. Each scale has a pronounced ridge, or keel, running down its middle.

These keels give the rattlesnake a rough, less "shiny" appearance than most snakes found in San Diego County. The function of these keels is uncertain, though some scientists believe they promote concealment. By breaking up the light reflecting off the snake, the keels may allow it to blend in with its dull surroundings.

The Rattle: A Warning Sound

When alarmed, the rattlesnake vibrates its tail in an effort to warn the intruder of its presence. Other snakes may do the same thing, but only the rattlesnake has a mechanical warning system – the rattle.

This rattle is composed of a number of hard, dry skin, much like your fingernails. The loose, articulation of these segments – not loose beads within the segments, as some people believe – results in the sound. When the snake vibrates its tail, one segment strikes the other. The buzz that results is a very effective warning.

A common belief is that the age of a snake can be determined by counting the number of segments in the rattle, one segment for each year. Not true. One segment is added each time the snake sheds its skin, and most snakes shed several times per year.

Rattlesnake Fun Fact

Did you know that the rattles found on the tip of the tail is dead skin that accumulates over time?