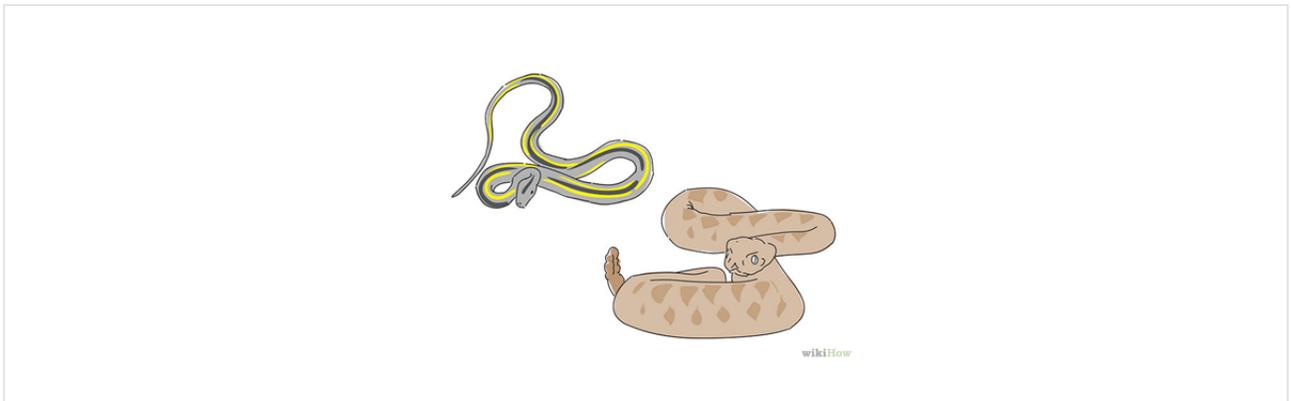


How to Avoid a Rattlesnake Attack

Rattlesnakes are pit vipers, found in various parts of the **United States**, **Canada**, and **Mexico**. In Central and South America, they are almost everywhere there is wilderness. Contrary to popular belief, rattlesnakes do not deliberately stalk human beings — their natural diet consists of **rats** and **mice**, **gophers**, small birds, **frogs**, and even the occasional meaty **insect**. All the same, a **snake's** instinct is to protect itself — if you think about it, a **snake** is a very vulnerable creature without legs, ears, or a large size. So poisonous venom becomes its key defense mechanism, injected via sharp fangs as soon as prey or threats come near. As such, the duty really rests on you to behave responsibly with alertness. Be wary, be certain and keep safe.

Steps



1

Know your snake. Is it a rattlesnake or a different kind of **snake**? To be safe, if you don't know, don't hang about to find out and if you cannot see without getting closer, don't even consider edging in any closer. But if you are aware of what the **snake** looks like, it might be helpful for a number of reasons, the main one being to know what to do if it does bite you or someone in your group. From a safe distance, look for:

- A flat, triangular-shaped head (although this may not be adequate to mark it) — broader at the base of the head than at the front.
- Heavy-bodied
- Openings between the nostrils and eyes — these are the heat-sensing pits

- Hooded eyes and elliptical pupils — these may not be readily apparent and you'll have to be fairly close to see this.
- Coloration — generally tan and brown patchwork; the Mohave rattlesnake is green, however, and has light bands at its tail end. If you can see these bands with the naked eye, you are probably too close.
- A rattle at the end of its tail (made of modified scales). Young rattlesnakes often have only a few parts of the rattler formed — be wary of this as the bites of newborns are still venomous. Rattles may also be broken off, malformed or silent. Do not rely on the rattler as the only form of identification.

1. **Be aware of when and where you are most likely to encounter a rattlesnake.** You are most likely to encounter rattlesnakes when you are hiking, climbing, camping, or even walking to see a tourist monument.

- Most rattlesnakes prefer hot environments, with some preferring desert climates but others, such as the Eastern Diamondback, prefer a moist climate. The majority live in the southern **United States** and **Mexico**, although some are found in Canada's Badlands desert region in Alberta and in British Columbia around Hedley, Keremeos, and Osoyoos.
- Rattlesnakes like **summer** evenings the best, just as the sun is going down and when it has gone — they are most active nocturnally in summertime. This just happens to coincide with the frailty of human eyesight kicking in as the sun goes down, so take care. Use a **flashlight** when walking about and wear good footwear.
- Rattlesnakes like warm days, period. Be it any season of the year, even **winter**, a rattlesnake can venture out in search of the warmth — suitable air temperature for rattlesnakes is around 70° and 90°F (21° to 32°C).
- Most rattlesnakes are not generally sitting about in the open — if they are in the open, they are moving through it much of the time. Rattlesnakes want to avoid contact with predators who can easily spot them in the open, including humans and large animals. As such, you will most likely encounter rattlesnakes around rocks, shrub and brush, or wherever there are nooks for them to hide among.

However, on sunny days, you might find rattlesnakes warming themselves on warm rocks or asphalt.



3

Dress appropriately. When in rattlesnake country, do not be blasé about clothing — the majority of bites occur on the **hands, feet** and ankles. So, apart from not sticking your hands where they shouldn't be, **clothing** becomes an important protection ally:

- Toss the **sandals** — this is time for good quality, thick **hiking boots**, and decent **socks**. Over the ankle boots are best, as ankle bites are common. Do not wear sandals, open-toed shoes or bare feet when walking in the desert. There are more things than rattlesnakes awaiting your foolhardiness if you do.
- Wear long, loose-fitting pants.
- Use gaiters if possible, especially if you choose not to wear long **pants**.



4

Behave appropriately when hiking, climbing, walking. When in rattlesnake territory, think like a rattlesnake to keep your mind on how they might behave so that you can behave accordingly:

- Always hike with at least one buddy. If you are alone and bitten, you will be in dire trouble. Carry a portable phone device that works and alert family or friends of your intended hiking course and duration.
- Stay out of the way. The easiest way to avoid rattlesnakes is to keep out of their way. Keep alert as you hike, walk, and climb. Stick to well-used trails and do not wander off into tall grass, underbrush and weeds where rattlesnakes may be hiding.
- Do not stick your hands in the wrong places. Don't stick your hands down holes, under rocks and ledges or even into brush when you are walking around. These are key hiding places for rattlesnakes. When hiking, it is best to carry a sturdy staff, or at least a long, sturdy and light stick, to help prevent using your hands in areas where snakes may hide.
- Don't sit down on tree stumps or logs without first checking inside. You might just be sitting on a rattlesnake....
- Step on and not over. When you need to cross logs and rocks, it is sensible to step on the objects rather than straight over them. This way, you can spot a rattlesnake that may be sheltering under it and can take evasive action quickly.
- Look before you leap. Take care where you land your feet. A foot coming straight down next to, or on top of a snake is asking for a bite. Snakes rely on vibration to hear and while they can sense you coming if you have stomped about loudly enough, they cannot deal with removing themselves fast enough if you blaze up a trail quickly and provide little warning of your approach.
- When walking, carry a stick, and whack bushes and undergrowth a bit before you walk on/near them, and snakes will get away. They'll go under bushes or thick grass immediately, so don't put your feet in/on those places! If you must step on those hiding places, probe them a bit first with your stick, so the snake has a chance to get away.
- Move out of the way. If you do walk into the range of a rattlesnake, calmly back off as quickly and quietly as you can.

- Take care around water. Rattlesnakes can swim. Anything resembling a long stick might be a rattlesnake.
- Do not provoke a rattlesnake. Angering a snake will result in one response — you become its target. Remember — a snake is defending itself from attack in such a case and if you poke it with sticks, throw stones at it, kick at it or do silly little jigs around it, you are asking for trouble. And worse still, there may well be a difference in the venom between an angered rattlesnake and one reacting quickly in self-defence — the toxicity may be increased, whereas a surprised rattlesnake may only bite without injecting venom (possible, not certain). Whatever the strength of the venom, an angered rattlesnake will be more likely to keep striking.
- Leave the snake alone. Many people are bitten in the process of trying to heroically rid the world of one more bothersome snake. Apart from the snake not being bothersome, the snake is going to bite you to try and defend itself. Live and let live — back off and let it have its space to slither away. And be warned — there is a reason for the saying "as mad as a cut snake" — an injured snake is a very, very dangerous foe.



5

Be vigilant when camping. There are risks during camping that you need to address.

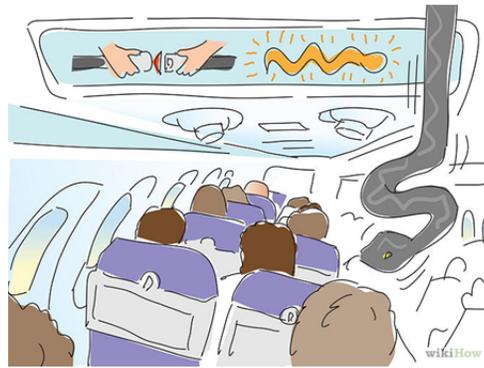
- Check the **campsite** before setting up. Arrive in daylight and set up in daylight. On warm nights, rattlesnakes may still be hanging about and if you cannot see what you are doing, you are at risk.

- Shut the **tent flap** at night if camping in rattlesnake territory or you may wake up to a very unwelcome surprise. Always check before going to bed that an unwanted guest isn't already lodged inside, attracted by warmth or the interesting hiding possibilities presented by a **tent**.
- Make sure all those using the **tent** keep the flap constantly shut when entering and leaving.
- Shake out sleeping bags before hopping in. Many an unwary sleeper has been unpleasantly awoken.
- Take care collecting **firewood**. Piles of wood are an ideal hiding place for rattlesnakes.
- Use a **flashlight** at all times during night walks.



6

Be responsible for all children by you. Children are naturally curious and bold all at once. While useful in a safe environment, these traits can lead to harm in a dangerous environment. Make sure that young children understand the dangers of rattlesnakes, know what not to do and know how to behave to avoid a rattlesnake encounter *plus* how to behave if they do encounter a rattlesnake. In a party of hikers with children, an adult should always lead and preferably another should bring up the rear.



7

Obey the warning signs! This means those of the snake and those of any humans in charge of warning you of the presence of rattlesnakes:

- *Recognize the signs of a rattlesnake about to strike.* These are general, sometimes there may be a strike without these signs because a rattlesnake can bite from any position if needed:
 - A rattlesnake in a coiled position — the coil permits the rattlesnake to make its most effective strike
 - The front end of its body (head) is raised
 - Its rattler is shaking and making rattle sound
- Just to make life a little more difficult, it is important to be aware that rattlesnakes do not or cannot always use their rattler to warn of impending attack. For instance, if you tread on it before it has time to rattle, it'll bite first and leave rattling until later. And sometimes they just don't rattle, for such reasons as being extra defensive during shedding, mating and giving birth. Or, they may prefer to rely on their coloration as camouflage, only to realize that this isn't going to protect them from the impending human feet. Also, wet rattlers do not rattle. There must be at least two segments of a rattle for it to be capable of making sound, therefore young rattlesnakes cannot make the rattle sound until this grows but they remain venomous all the same. Be aware of these possibilities. Otherwise, if you hear that rattle, you are clearly forewarned, so back off.

- Heed the signs from park rangers and other park authorities. Like the sign in the photo, when you are warned by the local park authorities that rattlesnakes are in the area, take the appropriate precautions set out above.



8

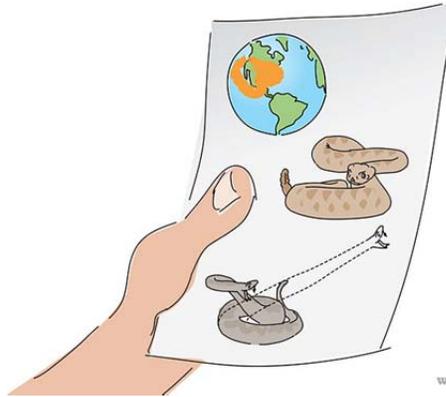
Note the striking distance of a rattlesnake. A rattlesnake's strike distance can be up to one third to one half of its overall length. It doesn't pay to underestimate a rattlesnake's length, however, and a rattlesnake might strike farther than you would expect. The strike of a rattlesnake is faster than the human eye can follow.



9

Remain calm if you or somebody else gets bitten. If you do get bitten by a rattlesnake, while serious, the most important thing is remain calm and still — dashing about moves the venom about faster. Key elements are remaining calm, remaining immobilized and getting to a hospital as quickly as possible. This helps prevent the spread of the venom. Keep the bite lower than the victim's heart (do not elevate the bite; that will increase circulation and spread the venom more rapidly), wash affected area and remove any potential constrictions such as rings (when swelling occurs constrictions could cause loss of blood flow and necrosis of tissues). For more on the procedure of dealing with a rattlesnake bite, see [How to Treat Snakebite](#).

2.



10

Review these steps before every encounter with rattlesnake territory. Share the information with those traveling with you to alert them to the need to be cautious, calm and considerate of what may be about.