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How can I tell if a snake is venomous?

Most venomous snakes in the United States belong to the family of snakes sometimes referred to as pit vipers. These snakes, which belong to the Family Crotalinae, include rattlesnakes, copperheads, and cottonmouths (water moccasins). All pit vipers in Arizona are rattlesnakes. These snakes are most easily identified by the presence of a rattle on their tail and a triangular shaped head. However, some young snakes may not have developed a rattle yet but still possess venom. When in doubt, avoid contact!

Aside from pit vipers, all other venomous snakes native to the U.S. are coral snakes, which belong to the Elapid family of snakes. Coral snakes found in the Eastern U.S. can be very dangerous to humans, but the Sonoran coral snake, found in Arizona, is not.

Is the Sonoran coral snake dangerous?

While coral snakes in other parts of the country may cause more serious toxicity, the Sonoran coral snake has caused some people to experience a numb sensation. There have been no life-threatening envenomations reported due to the Sonoran coral snake.

How do I avoid being bitten by a snake?

If you see a live snake, keep a good distance away from it. Do not attempt to touch or move the snake. Do not reach into bushes or areas you can not see well and pay close attention to where you step. Wear shoes or boots when hiking, and stay on marked trails. Avoid walking in brush which may obscure a snake.

Is a snake still dangerous after it is dead?

Yes. If you find a dead snake, do not come into contact with the snake's mouth, because dead snakes can still deliver venom through their fangs. Even a severed head of a snake still has the ability to inject venom when it is touched.

What happens when a person is bitten by a venomous snake?

Rattlesnake envenomation often causes severe pain and swelling. In some cases, skin and other tissues in the area of the bite may die, leading to loss of a finger or toe. Immediately after being bitten it is common to have pain, nausea, vomiting, and an unusual taste in the mouth. The venom also acts on the blood, putting the victim at risk for serious bleeding. Some people may experience severe allergic reactions, drops in blood pressure, swelling of the mouth and throat, or neurologic effects, such as numbness and weakness.

Is it possible to remove the venom after I've been bitten by a snake?

No. Venom is delivered to the local tissue and is absorbed into the body too rapidly to remove any significant amount. Attempting to extract the venom may damage tissue further, and has not been shown to change the effects of the snake bite.

What should I do if I'm bitten by a snake?

Get away from the snake and avoid another bite. If the bite was on an arm or a leg, keep that extremity as still as possible. Call 911 or go to your nearest emergency department for medical care right away.

If you are alone or are far away from civilization, call for help. If you need to hike to get help, keep yourself well-hydrated.

What shouldn't I do if I am bitten by a snake?

Do not place a tourniquet or constrictive dressing on the extremity. Do not apply ice. Do not cut, burn or electrocute the site, and do not attempt to suck venom out of the wound. All of these techniques can cause further damage, and will not improve the overall outcome from the bite.

Is it important to know which type of venomous snake bit me to get appropriate treatment?

It is helpful to be able to generally describe the snake which bit you (e.g. rattlesnake, exotic pet snake). It is not important to know the particular species of rattlesnake since all produce similar findings and result in the same treatment. Never risk another bite for the sake of identifying the snake.

What treatment am I likely to receive if I am bitten by a venomous snake?

Depending on your symptoms, you may need intravenous fluids and medications for nausea and/or pain. Rattlesnake bites are often treated with antivenom to prevent worsening of swelling and to counteract the effects of venom on the blood. The same antivenom may be used to treat bites by all species of rattlesnakes, copperheads, and cottonmouths native to the United States.

What medications should I avoid while being treated for a snakebite?

Do not use aspirin or nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medications such as ibuprofen after a snakebite, unless your physician says it is okay. Also speak with your physician before using any anti-platelet or anticoagulant medications for up to three weeks following a bite.

Is it possible to become immune to snake venom?

There is no evidence that being envenomated makes a person immune to future envenomations by snakes. In fact, people who are exposed to snakes may have a higher chance of having an allergic reaction to snake bites in the future.