

# NEWS FROM THE PIT

Arizona Poison and Drug Information Center



## Are You Ready to Spring into Action this Snake Season?

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It's that time of year again when we all want to get outside and enjoy nature. Guess who else likes this weather? All of the rattlesnakes that live around us! With the upcoming outdoor sporting events and family get-togethers, we all need to keep in mind that spring is the start of snake season in Arizona. Our habitat is expanding further into the desert and is overlapping more with rattlesnakes, so there are some important facts and behaviors everyone should know. In this issue, we will focus on rattlesnake bite prevention by talking about the factors leading to rattlesnake bites in Arizona.

### The Rattlesnake Rundown

Just like humans, rattlesnakes prefer the moderate temperatures of spring and fall. Also like humans, rattlesnakes tend to come out during warm afternoons. They like to avoid the cooler morning and night temperatures. If you are bitten, you must seek medical treatment. Rattlesnakes of any size can have enough venom to cause harm. Even harmless bites that only scratch you can cause serious health problems like bleeding issues, swelling, pain, and bruising. Symptoms may not show up for hours after a bite. It is in your best interest to treat every bite as soon as possible at your local hospital!

### NEWSLETTER HIGHLIGHTS

Factors leading to snakebites and how to prevent bites from occurring.

Image 1: Western Diamondback Rattlesnake (*Crotalus atrox*)

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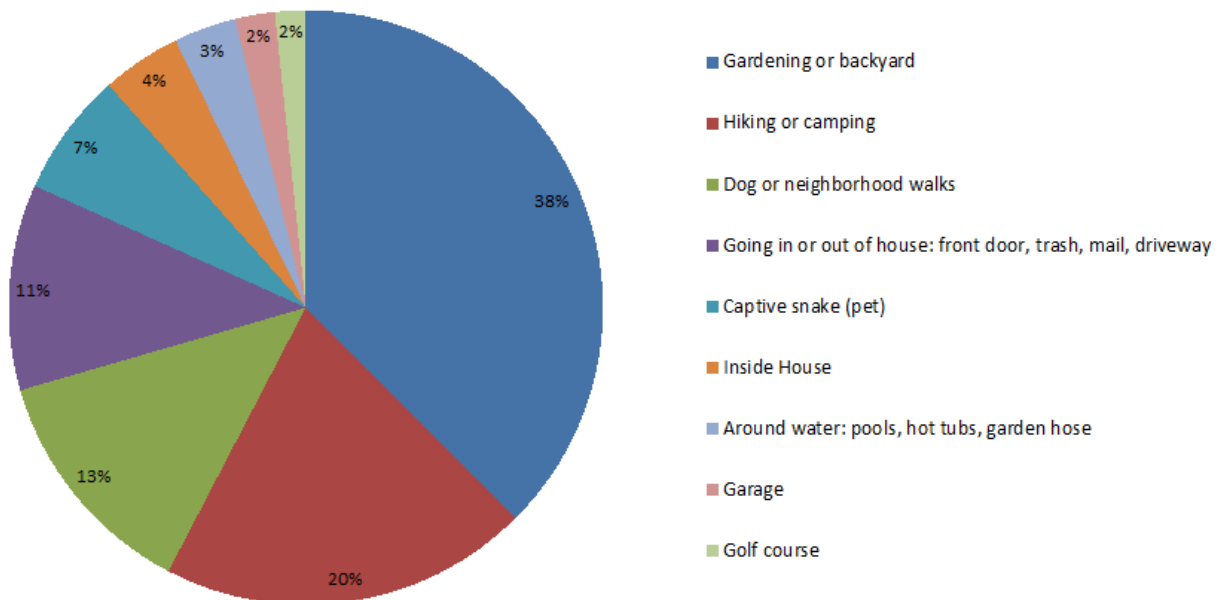
## Who?

Many more men are bitten by rattlesnakes than women. Most people are bitten around their own home, usually doing things like gardening or taking out the trash. Men receive more bites while golfing, hunting, or handling a captive rattlesnake. Women are more likely to be bitten while walking around the neighborhood. Regardless of your personal activities, it is best if you stay away from rattlesnake hiding places. To feel safe, they hide under piles of building materials, in heavy brush, and under rocks and low bush branches.

## What?

Most bites occur at home – more than a third! Arizonans have been bitten grabbing the mail, folding laundry, relaxing on the porch, or even cleaning the pool. Luckily, only a very small amount of bites happen inside houses or garages. Bites can happen anywhere, though. Some happen in the desert or while people are hiking or camping. Other bites happen around town, when people are doing activities like dog walking or playing golf. Regardless of where you are, you shouldn't rely on the sound of a rattle to warn you of a possible bite. Out of 455 people asked if they heard a rattle before being bitten, only a third heard a rattle. Surprisingly, 5% of those bitten never saw the rattlesnake that bit them!

### Bites During Different Activities



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## When?

Before we get into some of the details, there is a scary trend that needs to be highlighted: children have a much higher chance of being bitten during the spring compared to adults, especially between 4-10pm. This risk is increased even more in rural areas. Young children are often unaware of the dangers of rattlesnakes. Teach your kids not to reach for sticks in case that stick turns out to be a danger noodle slithering about!

In general, about half of all bites happen in the evening between 4pm-10pm, but this can change with different seasons. During spring, rattlesnakes are more active during the day so most encounters happen in the late afternoon. By mid-March, they start to move further away from their dens to lay in the sun and find their first meal. This is also the first mating period of the year, so male rattlesnakes are exploring farther and farther from home to find a mate. Therefore, they are highly active and are on the crawl for many more hours each day. This leads to greater odds of encountering one! When the weather starts getting hotter in summertime, rattlesnakes become predominantly nocturnal, so the potential for a rattlesnake encounter is high all night during summer, from sunset until the sun gets too hot the following morning. They enjoy the warmer mornings and are out earlier. The majority of all rattlesnake bites occur during the summer months since they are out during more of the day. When it starts to cool down again and winter approaches, rattlesnakes stay closer to their shelter. However, if their shelter is underneath your porch or in your backyard, you may still see them during the winter!

## Where?

No matter where you are, you can be bitten by a rattlesnake. People in urban areas account for the majority of bites, but bites still happen in smaller cities and rural areas too. Of special note, new construction zones disturb the natural habitat leading to increased wildlife activity, including rattlesnakes. Disturbed rattlesnakes cannot be expected to behave normally.

## Why?

Rattlesnakes are not aggressive and want to avoid us as much as possible. From the rattlesnake's view, it is defending itself from a huge, two-legged lumbering giant invading its space. You should expect to find rattlesnakes in areas where they have access to food, water, and shelter. If you encounter them regularly at home, you may have created the perfect rattlesnake habitat! Whether it's food, water, or shelter, simple actions can often fix these situations.



**Rattlesnakes are not aggressive and want to avoid us as much as possible.**



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## Preventing Bites

So are you ready to give up all your outdoor activities and never leave home between the hours of 4-10pm? Of course not! Instead, focus on preventing encounters and bites. Look where you and your furry friend are walking. Don't put your hands or feet in places you can't see. Keep your house doors shut. Look before you step, even around the house, on porches, driveways, etc. and use lights outside all night. Consider setting up outdoor lighting to illuminate common pathways you use outside the house. Keep the brush trimmed so you can see where you step. And most importantly, leave any rattlesnakes you come across alone.

Always be aware of the possibility that rattlesnakes are closer than you think. Wearing sandals or going barefoot, even in your own backyard, is risky. Close-toed shoes may not be able to prevent a bite, but they may be able to reduce the severity. Gardening and yard work require extra attention. Piles of wood, brush, and bushes are great places for a snake to hide in. They love low hanging bushes like lantanas, so keep them trimmed and blow the leaves out from under them. The only way to be sure there is no snake hiding in piles or bushes is to not give them the perfect hiding spot. Use long rakes or shovels if you need to remove piles from the yard. Don't grab the materials with your hands. Snakes like to hide in sheds and rodent holes, too. If you are wondering whether or not a snake is living in a hole in your yard, the safest way is to set up a camera and review the footage. Either way, keeping a tidy shed and filling in holes you find can help you avoid an encounter.

It's also important to teach your kids about rattlesnakes and show them what they look like. Let them know to leave any snakes alone, leave the area, and tell you when there is a snake nearby. Remind them every spring and keep a close eye on them when they're outside. Don't wait, now is the time to have that talk!



While you can teach your kids about rattlesnake dangers, it's a little harder to communicate that risk to your fur babies. You may have heard about the rattlesnake vaccine available for dogs. While the idea of protecting our furry friends is appealing, you should know that most studies found the vaccine didn't work. Keep an eye on your pets and take them to an emergency vet immediately if they are bitten. Never put yourself in harm's way when trying to remove them from a dangerous situation with a rattlesnake.

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Remember, rattlesnakes are experts in blending into their surroundings, so don't assume you will see it before it sees you. They don't always rattle before striking, so you can't rely on the sound of a rattle to warn you either. Several people each year mistake the sound of water for a rattle, so even the presence of a rattle may not be the warning you think it is. There is no replacement for paying attention while outside, no matter where you are.

Finally, it should go without saying that interacting with a rattlesnake carries risk. Whether it's killing, taking a picture, or trying to move them, your risk of being bitten is greatly increased when you choose to interact with them. More than a few good samaritans have been bitten trying to move the snake from the road to safety or from their neighbor's yard. Check with your local fire department – some will come and remove a rattlesnake for you for free. You can also call a rattlesnake removal service.

If you are looking for more information about snake fencing and removal services, look at Rattlesnake Solutions (<https://rattlesnakesolutions.com/>). We began doing research last year with them. We chose to work with them because of the company's long standing commitment to providing quality education to the public free of charge. That said, the AzPDIC does not endorse, or attest to the quality of their services. Several snake removal services can be found online and readers are encouraged to do their own due research when choosing a snake fencing or removal service.

Remember, the best way to avoid a bite is to avoid interacting with the rattlesnake at all and giving it plenty of persssoonal space. Stay safe and vigilant this snake season!

## **Some final tips and reminders to help you not get rattled this snake season:**

- Keep a close eye on your kids this spring and talk to them about the dangers of rattlesnakes
- No matter where you are there is a chance of a rattlesnake encounter
- Never try to interact with a rattlesnake

