

POISONology

SAFETY & FIRST AID TIPS FROM THE ARIZONA POISON AND DRUG INFORMATION CENTER

Gila monsters: shy but risky



The Gila monster is one of only three species of venomous lizards on the planet. They are **non-threatening** creatures who spend 95 percent of their lives in underground burrows. They come out occasionally to feed or soak in the warm desert sun.

These animals do not want to bite you. In fact, before biting, these desert creatures will often hiss or even back away slightly. This is their warning that they are not happy and are going into defense mode. If a Gila monster still feels threatened after this warning, then it can bite in a split second.

The bite is usually forceful and inflicts injury and serious pain. Once the Gila latches on, it chews on the site, releasing venom along the grooves in its teeth into the now open wound. It generally does not release its painful hold until it feels that that it is no longer in danger.

If you find yourself on the unfortunate end of one of these situations, **please seek medical attention** in the nearest emergency room. Although the bite is rarely life-threatening, symptoms from a Gila monster bite may include swelling, intense burning pain, vomiting, dizziness, weakness, rapid heart rate, and/or low blood pressure.

Preventing a bite is usually possible. If you see a Gila monster, **leave it alone and keep small children and pets away from it.** If the Gila monster doesn't relocate after a day, rural fire departments will usually come to assist.

The Arizona Poison and Drug Information Center offers the following advice if you are bitten by a Gila monster:

- Remain calm.
- If you are bitten on the arm or hand, try to get the lizard's feet on the ground by lowering it down. It may feel safer that way and let go.
- Pry the jaws open using a strong stick or other device. But, be sure to allow the lizard a strong foothold on the ground while you are prying it off, or you will only increase its agitation.
- Immobilize your bitten limb below your heart level.
- Get to a medical facility immediately.
- Do **not** apply ice, a constriction bandage or a tourniquet.
- Bitten pets should be taken to a veterinarian immediately.

Call the toll-free national hotline at 1-800-222-1222 to reach your local poison center. If you live in Arizona outside of Maricopa County, this number will get you to our experts at the Arizona Poison and Drug Information Center in Tucson.