

# POISONology

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

## Hiking in snake country?



We receive questions like this at the poison center, especially during rattlesnake season.

"My brother-in-law and I do a lot of one-day hikes. If we were about four hours from our starting point trailhead location and one of us was bitten by a rattlesnake and we don't have cell service, what do we do? We always ask people and get 10 different answers. Does one of us go back to the trailhead and seek help while the bitten one stays put? Do we both try and walk back to the trailhead? We just don't know the proper procedure. I do have a suction-type snakebite kit, but have been told doing nothing is the best thing...."

First, the odds of experienced hikers being bitten are very low. More than half of all bites occur when people are knowingly messing around with the snake. That being said, accidents **do** happen. So, if you are bitten, what should you do?

- 1. Do nothing except get to the hospital.** There is nothing you can do before going to the hospital that will change your outcome for the better. You are likely to do more harm than good. Cutting and sucking and using suction cups at the bite site can damage the muscle and tissue in the area and do not remove any venom. Ice can cause frostbite, and tourniquets can lead to limb amputations and shock.
- 2. So hike out.** Your best first aid kit contains a phone and car keys. If you are hiking long distances you are in great health which helps for a victim's outcome. If bitten on the hand, keep the hand at the level of your heart. If the bite is on the leg, calmly hike out. Take off any constricting objects, rings, bracelets, watches because of swelling that will occur. Get to an area of cell reception and call 911.
- 3. Many ask how long they have after being bitten to get to the hospital.** The only answer is "go as soon as possible." We use the saying, "**Time is tissue.**" This means the longer it takes to get to the hospital and receive care, the greater the risk of tissue injury. Remember, the **only** treatment that has ever been shown to benefit snakebite is **antivenom**. Bites can **never** be treated at home, and **all** bite victims need to be seen in a hospital.
- 4. Symptoms from a rattlesnake bite can be present immediately or be delayed 8-12 hours.** Rattlesnake bites can cause local injury, tissue death and severe swelling and/or affect the blood's ability to clot. Some of these effects are seen early, some later. **It is impossible to predict what will happen after someone is bitten.**