

Snakes Alive!

How To Identify Snakes

Snakes are important members of the natural world and make a significant contribution to the control of pests such as rats, insects, and other snakes. Poisonous snakes, however, are not desirable members of the human habitat. The risk of a poisonous snakebite is lower than that of being struck by lightning, and the risk can be reduced by:

- Cleaning up refuse and other hiding spots around buildings and yards;
- Wearing heavy shoes and pants in wooded areas; and
- Looking first before stepping or touching hidden areas where snakes are likely to be resting or hiding.

Most poisonous snakes in the United States belong to the pit viper group. The pit viper has pits on its head, vertical pupils, a triangular head, slim neck, and a heavy body with a single row of scales on the underside of the tail. The pit viper group includes the major categories of copperhead and cottonmouth and two major categories of rattlesnake. All pit vipers may vibrate their tail sections rapidly to make noise when threatened.

The cottonmouth and copperhead categories are often referred to as moccasins, but they are two distinct categories within the pit viper group.

Rattlesnake

There are many varieties of rattlesnakes that have pit viper characteristics and a button on the tail (youngest snakes), plus two to four segments of rattles for each year of age. The size range of rattlesnakes is 15 to 72 inches, with the record size a 96-inch eastern diamondback.

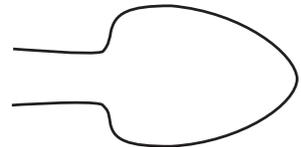
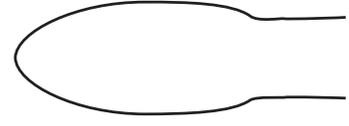
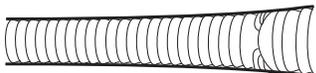
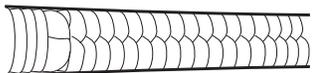
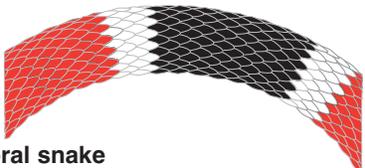
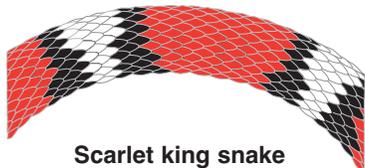
Copperhead

The five varieties of copperhead snakes have pit viper characteristics and bands or hourglass markings of brown, copper, or red on a tan body. The 20- to 36-inch snakes have regional differences in color and size; the young have a bright-yellow tail tip. An unusually large copperhead was recorded at 56 inches in length.

Cottonmouth

The semiaquatic cottonmouth also has pit viper characteristics, but

the adult has a solid-colored upper body that is olive brown or black and a lighter underside. Although often difficult to distinguish from the nonpoisonous water snake, a cottonmouth is usually more aggressive. While a water snake will leave rapidly when threatened, the pit viper often raises its head and confronts an enemy with a show of fangs inside a cotton-white mouth. The size of the cottonmouth ranges from 30 to 48 inches, with a record length of 74 inches.

Pit viper	Other snakes
	
Flat triangular head	Usually oval, elongated head
	
Facial pit; vertical pupil	No pit; round pupil
	
Single row of scales under end of tail	Double row of scales under end of tail
<p>The coral snake is an exception to the other snakes of the United States, because it has round pupils and an elliptical head, but it is quite poisonous. While the pit viper venom reduces the amount of oxygen carried by a victim's red blood cells, a coral snake has venom that rapidly affects the nervous system. The small mouth of the coral snake has trouble grasping and biting the larger human; however, the effect is more deadly than the pit viper once a bite is accomplished!</p>	
Poisonous snake	Nonpoisonous snake
	
Coral snake Other than markings, resembles nonpoisonous snakes	Scarlet king snake



If you are bitten by a snake...

1. Get emergency medical help as soon as possible, but as much as possible, refrain from moving about quickly.
2. Remove all items that may restrict circulation in the affected extremity. Watches, bracelets, rings, gloves, or shoes may pose a problem as the bite area swells.
3. Immobilize the affected area as much as possible. Attempt to keep the bite at or slightly below the level of the head.
4. If the snake is still in the area, do not attempt to kill or catch it, unless it poses a danger to you or the victim. Try to remember what it looks like so you can identify the type of snake from pictures in the emergency room.
5. **Do not:**
 - a. Place a tourniquet or constricting band above the bite;
 - b. Give the victim anything to eat or drink, particularly alcohol;
 - c. Place the affected area in ice;
 - d. Make any cuts or apply suction to the area;
 - e. Attempt to give antivenom; or
 - f. Administer pain or antianxiety medications.



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