

## **Avoiding and Treating Timber Rattlesnake Bites**

The question that often arises when the word rattlesnake comes up is “what if one bites me?” The likelihood of being bitten by a rattlesnake is quite small. Timber rattlesnakes are generally very docile snakes, and typically bite as a last resort. Instead, its instincts are to avoid danger by retreating to cover, or by hiding using its camouflage coloration to blend into its surroundings. If cornered, and provoked, a timber rattlesnake may respond aggressively. It will rattle its tail to let you know it is getting agitated. The snake may even puff itself up to appear bigger. Upon further provocation, the snake may bluff strike, where it lunges out, but doesn't open its mouth. If this doesn't work to scare away the threat (i.e. you or a dog), the snake may strike with an open mouth. Because venom is costly for a rattlesnake to produce, and you are not considered food, a snake often will not actively inject venom when it bites. In fact, nearly half of all timber rattlesnake bites to humans contain little to no venom, commonly referred to as dry or medically insignificant bites.

If you encounter a rattlesnake, or a snake you cannot identify, please do not try to capture or kill it. Statistics show there is a greater risk of being bitten when a person attempts to approach and kill a snake, rather than leave it alone. Do not try to harass the snake either.

Death due to a rattlesnake bite is unlikely. Timber rattlesnake bites in Minnesota are rare. Most bites result from people intentionally handling rattlesnakes and often involve the use of alcohol or drugs.

If a person is bitten by a timber rattlesnake, the following steps may benefit the bite victim.

### **IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING A BITE:**

#### **Do:**

- **Move away from the snake to avoid sustaining further possible bites**
- **Remain calm**
- **Remove rings, watches, bracelets**

#### **Don't:**

- **Do not cut the snakebite**
- **Do not apply ice**
- **Do not attempt to suck the venom out with your mouth**
- **Do not administer alcohol or drugs**

### **Bite Response Measures:**

Step 1: If a cell phone or radio is available, call for help immediately. Reassure the victim and do not allow unnecessary movement. Place the bitten limb in a comfortable position at a level slightly lower than the victim's heart. If the bite victim is in the field and is not accessible by vehicle/ATV, that person should walk slowly and calmly out of the field, trying to keep his/her heart rate down.

Step 2: Note the time that the bite occurred as the timeframe from bite to treatment is important for determining effectiveness of treatment. Look for the exact site of the bite (identify fang punctures). If you have a pen or a marker, outline the red, swollen area around the bite. This allows medical personnel to track the rate of swelling, which helps in determining the severity of the bite. If you do not have a pen/marker, this step may be skipped. It is more important to get to a medical facility than to search for a pen/marker.

Step 3: **Lightly** wrap a wide constriction band around the bitten limb just above the bite site. Leave the constriction band in place until the victim has arrived at a medical facility and antivenom therapy has been initiated if deemed necessary.

Step 4: Get to a hospital that carries antivenom as soon as possible, preferably within one hour of the bite. Call ahead, if possible, to alert them you are coming. Verify that they have **CroFab Antivenom**.

For consultation in case of a rattlesnake bite, please contact Dr. Dan Keyler, a toxicologist with the Hennepin County Medical Center, who specialized in venomous snake bites. (612) 873-8760

## Area Medical Centers that Stock Rattlesnake Anti-Venom:

**Minnesota:** Fairview Medical Center  
Red Wing, MN  
(651) 267-5000

Mayo Clinic  
Rochester, MN  
(507) 255-5591

Regions Hospital  
St. Paul, MN  
(651) 254-3456

Hennepin County Medical Center  
Minneapolis, MN  
(612) 873-3000

**Wisconsin:** Gunderson/Lutheran Medical Ctr  
LaCrosse, WI  
(608) 782-7300

Franciscan Skemp Healthcare  
LaCrosse, WI  
(608) 785-0940

**Iowa:** Winneshiek County Memorial Hospital  
Decorah, IA  
(563) 382-2911



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The fear of snakes is a learned behavior, which has been exacerbated by such things as myths and media misrepresentation. Public attitudes toward snakes are slowly changing. More people are beginning to see snakes not only as fascinating creatures, but also as important animals in nature. Timber rattlesnakes, which feed primarily on small mammals, help to keep rodent populations in check and help reduce threats associated with rodent-transmitted diseases.

Timber rattlesnakes live in the blufflands of southeastern Minnesota. They are not found anywhere else in the state. They can be distinguished from nonvenomous snakes by a pronounced off white rattle at the end of a black tail, by their head, which is solid brown/tan and noticeably larger than their slender neck, and by the dark, black bands running across their body.

### **Bite Response for an Animal**

If a dog is bitten by a timber rattlesnake, it should be taken to a veterinarian. If a horse or livestock is bitten, you should call a veterinarian to come out to check the animal. Most animals, if bitten by a rattlesnake, are bitten in the face. If venom is injected, it is usually not a fatal dose, but severe swelling will occur and can close off nasal passages. It is important to seek medical attention for the animal so that the swelling can be reduced and air passages opened up. Use of antivenom on dogs and livestock is an option, but is often not necessary. Most medium- to large-sized dogs, livestock and horses survive a timber rattlesnake bite.

### **IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING A BITE:**

#### **Do:**

- \* **Move the animal away from the snake to avoid sustaining further possible bites**
- \* **Remain calm, try to keep the animal calm**
- \* **Remove collar, bridle, or anything on the head if bitten in the face**

#### **Don't:**

- \* **Do not cut the snakebite**
- \* **Do not apply ice**
- \* **Do not attempt to suck the venom out with your mouth**

Rattlesnake bites are painful, so a bitten animal may act aggressively as a result of the pain. They may be easily agitated, and sensitive to touch around the bite. Your actions around a bitten animal should be slow and deliberate, in an effort to keep the bitten animal calm.