

What to do if your pet is bitten by a snake

November 4 2022



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The beginning of autumn brings pumpkins, falling leaves and baby snake season as snakes are born and hatched in late summer to early fall. The cooling weather also makes snakes more active, putting our curiously natured dogs and cats at higher risk of venomous bites.

It's a good idea to take your pet to the nearest vet clinic as safely and quickly as possible if they fall victim to a snake, regardless of whether or not you believe the snake is venomous.

Dr. Lance Wheeler, a veterinary resident at the Texas A&M School of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences, advises [pet owners](#) to familiarize themselves with [venomous snakes](#) indigenous to their region.

Texas is home to 15 potentially dangerous snake species or subspecies, according to the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department, with a majority of them falling into the pit viper subspecies. Pit vipers include various rattlesnakes, copperheads, and cottonmouths or water moccasins. Only one snake in the cobra snake family, the coral snake, is native to Texas.

Snake bite symptoms to watch for in dogs, cats and other household pets include shaking or twitching of the bite victim's muscles, difficulty breathing, hind limb weakness causing collapse, loss of bladder and bowel control, vomiting, paralysis, salivation, and enlarged pupils.

It is not always easy to spot [bite marks](#) on our furry friends, because the bites are easily concealed in their fur. If your pet is showing signs of weakness and fatigue, call the vet.

Treatment for a venomous snake bite starts at home with pre-hospital care and varies slightly between pit viper envenomation and coral snake envenomation.

"With pit viper envenomation, the most important thing is to keep the pet as calm as possible," Wheeler shared. "The higher their [blood pressure](#), the more anxious they are; that's going to increase blood flow and increase circulation of venom throughout the body.

"So try keeping them calm. Go to the nearest vet clinic," he said. "I

know it's tempting to go somewhere where there's anti-venom, but the nearest vet can always stabilize them, assess them, and then transport them quickly somewhere else if they need anti-venom."

While it's important to know what to do if your dog or cat has been bitten by a potentially poisonous snake, it's also important to keep in mind that not all venomous snake bites have high levels of envenomation. There is a chance that your pet will not have been injected with any venom, even if the snake inflicting the bite is venomous.

Your vet will run some medical tests to determine whether or not your pet needs antivenom. The most important thing for pet parents to do is get a suspected snake victim to the nearest vet hospital or clinic while remaining calm and keeping the pet as still as possible once a bite has been detected or the pet starts exhibiting envenomation symptoms.

Wheeler also advises pet owners against practicing common myths associated with snake bites before heading to the nearest clinic.

"It's not super helpful to ice pack or hot pack these guys," he said. "It's not been shown to be helpful to incise or suction the bites at the site where the biting incident occurred. Also no tourniquets or compression bandages."

Ice packs, hot packs and tourniquets can cause dramatic tissue damage by isolating the venom in one area. Venom isolation concentrates exposure and may lead to severe damage to the muscle, skin, and other organs in the area.

Wheeler explained that suctioning a pet's snake bite is complicated by their fur. Research on the benefits of suctioning the snake bite to remove venom suggests the time it takes to do so would be better spent getting

the victim to the nearest vet clinic.

The most important thing to keep in mind is safety for both you and your pet. While identifying the snake can be helpful, you should not risk your personal safety trying to capture the snake. Doing so wastes time that you could be using to get your pet to the veterinarian. If you suspect your pet has been bitten by a snake, take them in for veterinary care immediately.

Instead of trying to capture the snake, Wheeler recommends taking a photo from a safe distance. He also recommends leaving dead or decapitated snakes behind as they can still envenomate both you and your pet. If you're not able to identify the snake, err on the side of caution and head to the vet clinic with your pet as quickly and safely as possible.

If you are able to safely identify the snake as venomous, pay close attention to whether the snake is a pit viper or a coral snake.

Coral snakes are easily recognizable by their bright red, yellow and black stripes; however, they are also easily confused with scarlet kingsnakes. To differentiate a coral snake from a scarlet kingsnake, take note of the head color and the order in which their colorful stripes are patterned. Coral snakes always have a black head with a striped pattern of black, yellow, red, yellow, black.

If the snake is a coral snake, pre-hospital treatment may require pet parents to perform mouth-to-nose ventilation en route to the nearest veterinary hospital, because coral snake venom can trigger respiratory paralysis, causing the pet victim to slow or stop breathing.

Coral snake venom is the most toxic, however coral snake envenomation only occurs in about 60% of exposures to coral [snakes](#), according to a

2011 study published by Drs. Lyndi Gilliam and Jill Brunker. While many theories exist about why coral snake exposure only results in venomation in 40% of exposure cases, Wheeler noted that it's still important to get your pet to the vet as quickly as possible if you suspect they've been exposed to a coral snake.

"Nobody's got coral snake antivenom, so just go to the nearest veterinary hospital," Wheeler advised. "The most common cause of death from [coral snake](#) envenomation is [an abnormally low concentration of oxygen in the blood]. So, we need to hospitalize these guys for at least 48 hours of monitoring, because clinical signs can develop within up to 36 hours post envenomation."

If you find your pet has fallen victim to a snake bite this season, stay calm and get them to the nearest veterinarian as safely and quickly as possible for examination. Doing so will help get you and your pet back outside enjoying the autumnal change in season.

Provided by Texas A&M University

Citation: What to do if your pet is bitten by a snake (2022, November 4) retrieved 20 March 2023 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-11-pet-bitten-snake.html>

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