

It's snake bite season in Georgia. What you need to know

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With spring in full swing and everyone spending more time outdoors, one thing we should all be looking out for is snakes. More specifically, the venomous variety.

Georgia's snake season starts in the spring when the cold spell finally passes and, just like the rest of us, the ectothermic—cold-blooded—critters slither out of their winter burrows to soak up those cozy sunrays.

They're easily camouflaged in your garden, your bushes and even the wide-open yard where your grass is growing just a little taller than normal because you forgot to mow—again. So it's easy to stumble upon them and inadvertently provoke a bite if you're not keeping your eyes peeled. That goes for your pets, too, so watch out for them.

But you shouldn't worry about most [snakes](#). Only seven of Georgia's 47 species are venomous, according to the Department of Natural Resources. That includes Eastern diamond-backed, timber and pigmy rattlers, eastern and Florida cottonmouths, the copperhead and coral snake.

The [coral snake](#) and the Eastern diamondback mostly inhabit South Georgia. The copperhead, however, is by far the most common species in the metro area. And, aside from the "unknown snake," it's the most commonly reported bite.

It's also the prime suspect in a bite last month that left a 2-year-old hospitalized in metro Atlanta, according to Dr. Gaylord Lopez, executive director for the Georgia Poison Center. The child was bitten while playing in a yard and later required antivenom but is doing OK, he said.

"Copperheads, water moccasins (cottonmouths) and rattlers—sort of in that order—are the ones that we get consulted about most frequently," Lopez said.

Across the state each year, there are about 450 to 550 bites reported to the poison center. Already this year, five bites were reported within a

week, and Lopez estimated the total would climb to about a dozen or more by the end of March.

But contrary to popular belief, you should not use a tourniquet, apply ice or try to suck out the venom if you've been bitten. The same rules apply if your pet has been bitten.

"All it takes is a molecule of snake venom to be a problem," Lopez said. "When the venom gets into your system, you're talking about tens of thousands of molecules. Say you're able to suck out, you know, 10 or 100 molecules. You've still got 900 still floating around."

The other practices can cause more tissue damage, he warned. And for the love of common sense, do not, under any circumstance, resort to electric shock.

"You don't hook up someone to a car battery and try to shock the venom out of their system," said an exasperatedly unamused Lopez.

Instead, the most important thing you can do is to get to a hospital—and fast. If you're in the wilderness, call for help, stay calm and keep the wound stable and elevated as you wait.

"The hospital evaluation is all about assessing the wound, and in a lot of cases, you're worried about infection at the site," Lopez said.

"Remember, a lot of these victims don't even see the snake, so they need to be observed. They need to be monitored."

Even if you are sure you've been bitten by a venomous species, it doesn't automatically mean you will need antivenom.

"A good majority of cases that we hear about end up being dry bites," Lopez said. That means the venom was either only minimally released or

not at all.

Of the bites reported each year, roughly 25% require an antidote, he said.

While snakes are prevalent across the state, their presence shouldn't cause fear. Encounters are relatively infrequent, and they're good to have around because they eat rats, mice and other animals considered pests. Some species have even been used as bioindicators to assess pollutants in the environment, according to the DNR.

There's been a recent decline in many of the state's species of snakes, with two of them—the eastern indigo and the southern hognose—listed as threatened, the DNR reports. The indigo is also federally protected under the Endangered Species Act.

That's important to know because it's illegal to kill any nonvenomous snake in Georgia—a misdemeanor offense that is punishable by up to a year in jail and a \$1,000 fine. But some harmless snakes, such as the hognose, imitate their venomous counterparts. It inflates its head and neck, coils, hisses and strikes when disturbed, but doesn't bite.

If you come across a snake, the best course of action is to simply leave it alone, and it'll leave you alone. So get out and enjoy the warmer weather, but just keep an eye on the ground and steer clear of our slithering neighbors.

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