

Snakes

One of the many things that fascinate me about Nana was his “Power” over rattlesnakes. Whatever it was it would have made him a good man to have around in those days. While less common today, there are still a lot of rattlers in the back country

About 1,000 people are bitten by rattlers each year in the U.S. About 3 percent of these bites are fatal, and the proportion appears to be rising, although toxicologists aren’t sure why. Even if you survive, the antivenin treatment is both painful and very expensive.

Carry a stick when you hike, even if it’s just a quarter-mile nature trail off the parking lot. Tramp solidly and strike rocks with your stick as you walk. The vibration (hopefully) alerts anything on the ground in front of you, announcing as to Bambi that “MAN is in the forest!”



The *Western Diamondback*, one of the largest of all rattlers (up to 6 ft long) is the most common of the seven species found in New Mexico. This “coon-tail” rattler has black and white rings on its tail.

Wear stout boots, and **watch where you put your hands and feet**. Stop to admire the view, take pictures, consult map or GPS, have a snack or a few swallows of water, relax and catch your breath. But when moving stay on the trail and keep your eyes on the ground in front of you.

- *If bitten, try and identify the type of snake. If you heard rattling or notice rattles at the end of the snake's tail, it is likely a rattlesnake.*
- *Stay calm. Get safely away from the snake. The less movement the better.*
- *Have someone call 911. Help will be sent or you will be referred and directed to the nearest emergency care facility that has anti-venom.*
- *Swelling in and around the bite wound will likely be the first symptom. Immediately remove any jewelry that could become embedded within the swelling.*
- *If you are alone, keep the affected limb lower than your heart. If someone is with you, lie-down while he or she calls 911.*
- *Shock could set in. Preserve body heat and keep the affected limb as immobile as possible.*
- *If possible, wash the wound with soap and water.*
- *If you are deep in the wilderness and have to walk to a vehicle, sit calmly for about 20 minutes to let the venom localize at the wound area.*
- *Exertion will stimulate circulation of the venom, so avoid unnecessary movement.*

There have been many snake bite remedies offered over the years. Recent studies have concluded that the following protocols are best::

1. Stay calm, get safely away from the snake, and have someone call 911. The less the victim moves the bitten site, the less likely the venom will be profused and cause damage.
2. Have the victim lie down with the affected limb lower than the heart. Keep the limb immobilized. If practical, splint the limb.
3. Treat for shock and preserve body heat.
4. Remove any rings, bracelets, boots, or other restricting items from the bitten extremity. (It *WILL* swell.)
5. Apply a light constricting band about 2" above and below the bite, however never place the bands on either side of a joint (such as above and below the knee or elbow). This band should be made up of wide, soft material, that could be a handkerchief or shredded clothing. The band should only be as tight as the band the nurse applies when giving a blood test.
 - **NOTE:** The purpose of constricting bands is to restrict lymphatic flow, not blood, so they should not be too tight. Check pulses below the bands and readjust them as necessary when they tighten due to swelling.

6. Wash the bite with soap and water (if available).
7. If the victim has to walk out, **sit calmly for 20-30 minutes to let the venom localize at the site**, proceed calmly to the nearest source of help and try to avoid unnecessary exertion that will stimulate circulation of the poison.
8. Get the victim to definitive medical care for antivenin, that will provide the greatest relief from the toxic effects of the bite.

ACTIONS TO AVOID:

1. **DO NOT** cut the bite. The additional tissue damage may actually increase the diffusion of the toxins throughout the body.
2. **DO NOT** apply a tourniquet. Such action can result in the loss of the limb.
3. **NEVER** try to suck out the venom by mouth. You can try the suction cup in a snakebite kit if it doesn't delay other needed treatment. Suctioning seldom provides any measurable advantages, however.
4. Do not apply cold and/or ice packs. **Recent studies indicate that application of cold or ice makes the injury much worse.**



Will a snake crawl into your sleeping bag at night? I believe I picked this idea up from Western pulp fiction (it's mentioned in *Little Big Man* and *True Grit*, as well), but I used to dismiss it as rural folklore, the kind of tale you use to scare youngsters around the campfire. Then I met an old rancher who swore he knew two fellas it happened to. He claimed another cowboy took to sleeping up on top of the horsetrailer when they were benighted in the back country, until he rolled off one night and broke his leg.

"Don't sleep on the ground!" the old man called cheerily as he put his pickup in gear and pulled away in a cloud of dust.

I don't. Generally, I curl up in the bed of my pickup. I sleep better off the ground.