

Snakes and Snakebites

You & Your Pets

If you encounter a snake, just back away from it slowly.

Lake Ridge only has one indigenous venomous snake: the copperhead. Young copperheads have a yellow tail for the first year. While we do not have water moccasins (aka cottonmouth) in Northern Virginia, we do have the non-venomous black, heavy-bodied northern water snake which I have seen on Hooes Run and on Airport Creek. They do not have the triangular head nor do they have the strong musky smell (musk gland) of the water moccasin. When disturbed, water moccasins stink. While the copperhead is not aggressive like the water moccasin, its perfect hourglass coloration makes it invisible on leaf litter. They will bite and they give no warning if they feel threatened or are stepped on.

The severity of the bite will vary with the size of the victim and amount of venom injected. Copperheads have hemotoxic venom which often results in temporary tissue damage in the immediate area of the bite. The bite may be painful, but is rarely fatal to humans. Children, elderly, and persons with compromised immune systems may have stronger reactions.

Copperheads sometime deliver a “dry bite” – strike without injecting venom. This ability to control venom injection is less likely to occur with a young snake. How do you know if it is a “dry bite”? You don’t until it is too late – when the effects of the venom do or do not start to set in.

ANYONE BITTEN BY A COPPERHEAD SHOULD SEEK MEDICAL ATTENTION.

Signs Of A Copperhead Bite

- A pair of round puncture marks at the wound
- Redness and swelling around the bite
- Severe pain at the bite
- Nausea and vomiting
- Labored breathing
- Disturbed vision
- Increased salivation and sweating
- Numbness or tingling around face and limbs

What to do if bitten by a snake

- Try to remember the coloration, pattern, and shape of the head of the snake.
- Keep the victim calm as this will slow the spread of the venom.
- Seek medical attention as soon as possible.
- Call 9-1-1
- If you cannot get the victim to a hospital right away
 - Lay or sit the victim down with the bite below the level of the heart
 - Keep the person calm and still

DO NOT

- Pick up or try to trap the snake as you may be bitten also. Instead, take a picture (from a safe distance) with your phone.
- Apply a tourniquet
- Slash the wounds with a knife
- Suck out the venom
- Apply ice or immerse the wound in water
- Drink alcohol as a pain killer
- Drink caffeinated beverages

Bites by non-venomous snakes

The mouths of non-venomous snakes are full of bacteria from the rodents they eat. Therefore, bites from known non-venomous snakes should still be thoroughly cleansed with an antiseptic (e.g., hydrogen peroxide) and an antibiotic should be applied to prevent infection.

What about your pet?

Do not allow your pet to explore holes in the ground or dig under logs, flat rocks or planks. Stay on open paths where snakes are more visible. Controlling your dog with a leash while outside may be your best preventative. Off-trail hiking with an unleashed dog may stir up a snake and you may be as likely a victim as your dog. If your pet seems unusually curious about "something" hidden in the grass, investigate carefully.

As with persons, the severity of the bite will vary with the size of the pet and the quantity of venom injected with small dogs and cats being more vulnerable. If bitten, a veterinarian should evaluate your pet as soon as possible. Snakebites are painful and your pet should be given pain medication. Bites are very prone to infection so antibiotics are also a standard part of treatment. Diagnostic tests may also be warranted to determine if your pet is experiencing any systemic effects from the venom.

Copperhead bites are usually treated with pain medications and fluid therapy to counter potential hypotension or shock. Wounds are clipped/cleaned and monitored for signs of tissue death. Antibiotics are given to prevent infection of the bite wound.. Anti-venom is rarely indicated, but in certain cases such as a bite to the tongue or eye it may be a useful part of therapy,

References:

Center for Disease Control

<https://www.cdc.gov/disasters/snakebite.html>

Copperhead Snakes: Facts, Bites, & Babies

<https://www.livescience.com/43641-copperhead-snake.html>

Veterinary Specialty Hospitals Of The Carolinas

<http://www.vshcarolinas.com/services/emergency-and-critical-care/snakebites>