

Snake! Is it venomous?

Warm weather brings snakes out of hibernation and into yards and other areas where they come into contact with people. The vast majority of snakes seen around yards and fields is harmless—that is, they are not venomous!

Non-venomous snakes in Tennessee have round pupils and all the scales on the underside of the tail are divided in two. All naturally occurring venomous snakes in Tennessee are pit vipers. The pit (small hole), located between the nostril and the eye, are actually heat sensors used to detect warm-blooded prey in low-light conditions. Venomous snakes (pit vipers) that occur naturally in Tennessee include the copperhead (highland moccasin), cottonmouth (water moccasin), timber rattlesnake (including the canebreak rattlesnake), and pygmy rattlesnake. Only the copperhead and timber rattlesnake are found throughout Tennessee. The cottonmouth and pygmy rattlesnake are found only in west Tennessee. Contrary to popular belief in some areas, cottonmouths do not occur in east Tennessee, but the northern water snake, which is similar in appearance, is quite common.

Unless posing an immediate health threat, all snakes in Tennessee are protected and indiscriminate killing is illegal. Further, snakes play a vital role in our natural communities, helping keep rodent populations in check and providing food for other predators. If snakes are common around the house, it is probably because there is an abundance of rodents in the area. Snakes are typically found in areas that provide shelter for rodents, such as woodpiles, brushpiles, rockpiles, and old sheds and barns (especially where feed is stored). The best way to reduce the snake population around a house is to remove or clean up those areas attractive to rodents. Vegetation should be mowed closely and all brushpiles and rockpiles near the house or other buildings should be removed to make the area less attractive to rodents and snakes.

If you encounter a snake outside, the best thing to do is leave it alone! Snakes want to avoid people and usually try to escape if they can. If bitten by a snake, try to remain calm. Identify the snake if at all possible. Bites from venomous snakes are quite painful, but treatable, so seek medical attention immediately. Do not treat a snakebite wound with ice, tourniquets, or cutting an “X” over the wound, then trying to suck the venom out! These old wives’ tales are not effective. Just go to the doctor—statistics suggest you will be fine.

Nationwide, approximately 50,000 people are bitten by snakes each year. Only 7,000 are from venomous snakes. Of those 7,000, 1,200 do not seek medical attention yet recover fully. Only 10 – 12 people die from snakebites in the United States each year and half of these are bitten by western and eastern diamondback rattlesnakes—neither of which occur in Tennessee. More than twice as many people die from wasp stings and about 100 people die each year from being struck by lightning. In the past 40 years, there have been only seven recorded deaths from snakebites in Tennessee.

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