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# Arizona's Venomous Creatures

## Rattlesnakes



There are 13 species of rattlesnakes that have been identified in Arizona. The most common are in the lower desert regions and include the western diamondback, Mohave, and sidewinder. Their bites are extremely painful and destructive but rarely fatal. Many bites occur when people try to kill, capture or mess with the snake, so it's safest to leave them alone. Using caution and basic common sense while in Arizona's great outdoors will make the experience far more pleasurable... and safer.

Extra caution should be taken when walking or climbing in the desert or mountains at certain times of the year, especially when the daytime temperatures remain above 82 degrees Fahrenheit. Rattlesnakes become more active during March and April and move to areas where they can soak up the sun. During the hot summer months the temperature is too high for daytime activity. These snakes are most active during August and September when the overall climate is ideal for them.

Baby rattlesnakes are typically born the end of July, and are capable of biting and secreting venom from birth. Some species of baby rattlesnakes are more toxic on a drop to drop basis than their adult counterparts, but are far less dangerous because they cannot inject the same amount of venom.

Most rattlesnakes have a flattened, triangular shaped head with a heat sensing pit located between the nostril and eye on each side that is used to locate and trail prey. Different species of rattlesnakes can be of different lengths, with the western diamondback growing up to six feet in length.

The loosely attached horny rings, or rattles, at the tip of the tail are the source of the rattle sound. A baby rattlesnake is born with a pre-button on the end of its tail and only after the first molt at about two weeks does it have a button. An actual rattle does not appear until about three or four months. The actual rattling can serve as a warning, but not always, as rattlesnakes can strike without warning or making a sound. Their striking distances ranges between 1/4 to 1/2 of their body length.

Do not handle dead snakes or their severed heads because a reflex strike/bite can occur for hours after the snake is dead. Coloring varies by species, but most blend in well with their environments. Rattlesnakes are usually mottled or banded in shades of tan and brown, but can also be a combination of grayish green, orange, red, bright green, yellow, black or peach.

### ***Signs & Symptoms of a Bite***

Immediate pain or a burning sensation occurs at the site of the bite with fang marks usually visible. Victims may experience a metallic or rubbery taste in their mouth. Significant swelling usually occurs within minutes, and symptoms may progress to weakness, sweating and/or chills, nausea and vomiting.

A small percentage of rattlesnake bites are “dry,” meaning that the snake has not injected venom. But do not count on being one of the lucky ones: seek help immediately – only a physician can determine if you have a “dry” bite. The venom injected contains several enzymes designed to attack the tissue at the bite site that can cause severe tissue damage. The venom also contains components that cause blood thinning and other effects on the body. The Mohave rattlesnake venom may also contain a neurotoxin that results in severe muscle weakness.

### ***Treatment***

Seek medical attention from a hospital emergency room immediately! You will be evaluated and administered antivenin if necessary. Regardless of whether you are a great distance from your car or have to move slowly GET HELP. You'll have time to reach medical care.

Don't panic. Stay as calm as possible. If bitten on the hand, remove all jewelry before swelling begins.

#### **DO NOT:**

- Apply ice to the bite site or immerse the bite in a bucket of ice.
- Use a constricting band/cloth or tourniquets.
- Restrict blood flow in any manner.
- Cut the bite site or try to suck out the venom. Leave the bite site alone!
- Use electric shock or stun guns of any kind.
- Try to capture the snake to bring to the hospital. Time spent capturing the snake delays arrival at the emergency department, and may result in additional bites. Identification of the snake is not necessary for treatment. The physicians treat the symptoms as they occur and modify the antivenin/treatment as needed. Treatment is not snake specific.

## Scorpions



There are approximately 56 species of scorpions in Arizona. All scorpions sting (they do not bite) and inject venom, but only one scorpion in the United States is classified as potentially deadly: the Arizona Bark scorpion – how fortunate for us.

The bark scorpion occurs naturally throughout Maricopa County and most of the state. It is commonly found inside homes and buildings where it seeks out a defined area in which to live. If a structure is on that area the number of scorpions finding their way inside can be controlled but can never be completely eliminated.

The bark scorpion is one of several small scorpions and is about one and one half to two inches in length. It has two distinguishing characteristics. The **first** is that it is the only scorpion in Maricopa County that climbs. It easily climbs any surface except clean glass and clean plastic. It can cling to the underside of a piece of wood, walk across your ceiling, climb furniture, and get into clothing and cupboards. They are most active at night and seek places that are warm, dark and damp. The **second** important characteristic is that it curls up its tail and lays it down flat next to its body. This allows the scorpion to become very flat and squeeze into very small and narrow cracks.

The bark scorpion's color varies from clear, light tan, rubber band or darker golden brown. Color and size is not a good way to identify this scorpion.

Most calls to Poison Centers for scorpion stings occur from April through October.

### ***Special Precautions***

Because children under six years of age are more likely to develop severe symptoms if stung, special care should be taken if you are visiting or live in an infested home:

- Children should be protected in their cribs/beds. To prevent the bark scorpions from climbing up, place the crib/bed legs in glass jars.
- To keep the scorpions from coming into the crib/bed sideways, move the crib away from the wall and be that blankets and sheets do not touch the floor or walls.
- To prevent the scorpions from dropping in, you need to install a scorpion shield. Hang a piece of flat plastic, or other flat smooth board that is bigger than the size of the crib, several inches from the ceiling.

Place double-sided sticky tape around the inside of the board. Scorpions will then fall onto the board and get stuck, rather than fall into the crib/bed.

- Check the crib/bed in advance of putting the child to bed.
- Shake out all clothing and shoes before putting them on the child.
- Have the child wear shoes at all times and be especially careful around hot tubs and pools in the evening.

All of the above precautions also apply to adults, particularly the elderly and those suffering with allergies or respiratory conditions.

### ***Signs & Symptoms of a Sting***

The bark scorpion sting is extremely painful, but does not usually cause swelling or redness at the sting site. Victims describe the feeling as similar to having a piece of metal heated in a fire and then stabbed into the skin.

The immediate local pain and burning are usually followed by numbness and tingling that travels up an arm or leg. This is a totally natural reaction to the sting.

If visual disturbance, difficulty swallowing and swollen tongue sensations, slurred speech or respiratory problems occur, they should be reported to the Poison Center.

A sting by one of the other 55 scorpions will feel similar to that of a wasp with local swelling and pain.

Young infants and children are at greater risk of serious symptoms. A major problem is identifying that a scorpion sting has occurred because there will not be a visible mark or swelling. The child will be hurting and upset, and then the eyes will start moving in an uncoordinated, roving manner. In some instances the child may become hyperactive with accompanying facial twitching and heavy drooling.

### ***Treatment***

Call the Arizona Poison & Drug Information Center at 1.800.222.1222 to receive first aid instructions and determine if the victim needs further medical care.

## Black Widow



Females are the dangerous ones of the species. A mature female black widow spider has a large, black, shiny body and measures approximately 3/8 inch long, with one-inch legs. A bright red or orange-red hourglass shape can be found on the abdomen.

The Black widow's web is white, very strong, and irregularly shaped. It's generally spun in areas where water and insects are present. Around the home webs can be found under outdoor furniture, barbecue grills, pool pumps, in storage areas, garages, wood piles, block fences and the corners of porches and patios.

The female black widow is shy. She hides near the web by day typically in some sort of sheltered spot and is most active at night, waiting on her web for prey to enter. She produces hundreds of babies hatched from egg sacs resembling small mothballs. The young black widows are white and spread quickly after hatching.

The male black widow is much smaller, with brown and white coloring. Its bite cannot pierce human skin and is not harmful to humans because the spider is so small.

### ***Control***

To control the black widow population spray the adult female with a strong insecticide and destroy the egg sacs. Use a flashlight at night to locate the female black widow spider in her web waiting for prey.

### ***Signs & Symptoms***

The initial bite may feel like a pin prick, which may go unnoticed. Initially victims experience little or no visible signs of the bite such as swelling. A red circular mark may appear about six hours after the bite.

These symptoms may be progressive aching sensations with muscle pain at the bite site spreading to the lower back, thighs and limbs. Symptoms often last up to 36 hours and lingering effects may last for several weeks.

### ***Treatment***

Call the Arizona Poison & Drug Information Center at 1.800.222.1222 immediately to determine whether the bite victim can be managed at home or will require treatment by a physician or hospitalization. Severe cases may require antivenin treatment.

## Conenose Bug



Four species of the conenose bug, also known as kissing bug, assassin bug or Walapai tiger, live in Arizona. This slow-moving bug is dark brown to black with yellow/red markings on the abdomen and measures one half to one-inch long. Its body is long with three pairs of legs and cone-shaped head.

The conenose bug usually bites and feeds on the blood of a sleeping person. They live in pack rat nests and are generally seen in the spring and summer. They are drawn to homes by the evening lights.

### ***Signs & Symptoms***

The bite may not be painful, but will cause redness, swelling and itching.

### ***Treatment***

Call the Arizona Poison & Drug Information Center at 1.800.222.1222 to determine whether the bite victim can be managed at home or will require medical treatment. If possible, capture the bug to help confirm that you were bitten by a conenose bug.



### **Africanized Honey Bee**

Almost all the bees in Maricopa County are now classified as Africanized honey bees or killer bees. These bees look just like the European honey bees that we have known for so long. The venom injected by the stinger is no different. What is different, however, is the aggressiveness they display in defending their hive or colony, which they change several times each year. Do not try to clear out the bees yourself, but instead call the local fire department or beekeeper. Once an attack begins it can last for days. A single sting is no more powerful or painful than a European honey bee. They can sting only once before dying, but it is the number of stings that can be inflicted because of their massive swarms that can cause illness or even death. It takes over 10 stings per pound of body weight to cause serious illness.

If attacked, cover your head and run to the nearest place that will enable you to shut out the bees. A car, truck or home will work, but do not dive into water. Some bees will come with you, while the rest remain outside.

If you choose a car or truck, close the outside vents, and if you have air conditioning, turn it on to calm the bees.

### **Ants**

Ants can sting or bite and use their venom to kill smaller creatures or to keep intruders away. Therefore, the best prevention is to avoid stepping or sitting on their nests.

Two types of ants cause problems in Arizona; harvester ants and field ants. Harvester ants are large and red, dark brown or black in color. They can sting but the stingers are fairly blunt and the pain lasts four to six hours. Field ants are medium in size. After biting, they spray acid into the wound, causing short-lived pain.

### **Wasps**

Wasps are slender with a relatively thin waist and four wings. They're smooth and somewhat shiny with brightly colored "skin," generally having sharply contrasting black and yellow patterns. Females can sting multiple times. The males have wings but no stingers. Wasps are predators and feed on insects and spiders.



One type, the umbrella or paper wasp, is colored in dull shades of brown and yellow. It's usually only a threat when disturbed in its umbrella-shaped nest. Because its stinger is not barbed, it can be removed and reinserted repeatedly, each time metering out enough venom to cause considerable pain.

## **Yellow Jackets**

Western yellow jackets have jagged bands of yellow and black and are found in the Southern parts of the state and above the Mogollon Rim. The stings are painful and occur mostly outdoors when nests are bothered.

The severity of an insect sting reaction varies from person to person. A normal reaction will result in pain, swelling and redness around the bite site. A large local reaction includes swelling and redness beyond the sting site. Although frightening in appearance, these large local reactions will go away over several days.

The most serious reaction to an insect sting is an allergic one. ***Any one of these reactions requires immediate medical attention.*** Symptoms of a severe allergic reaction or "anaphylaxis" may include may include one of the following:

- Hives, itching or swelling in areas other than the sting site.
- Tightness in the chest and difficulty breathing.
- Hoarse voice or swelling of the tongue.
- Dizziness or a sharp drop in blood pressure.
- Unconsciousness or cardiac arrest.

This type of reaction can occur within minutes after the sting and may be life-threatening. People who have experienced an allergic reaction to an insect sting have a good chance of a similar or worse reaction if stung again by the same kind of insect; always carry appropriate medicine prescribed by your physician with you when outdoors.

## ***Treatment***

Call the Arizona Poison & Drug Information Center at 1.800.222.1222 to determine whether the bite victim can be managed at home or will require medical attention.

## ***What you don't know can hurt you when it comes to bites and stings – prevention is the best medicine***

Many people are surprised to discover that the Sonoran desert in Arizona is alive with a variety of plants and living creatures. A few of these creatures are venomous and feared because of their bite or sting.

### ***What can you do?***

- Learn which creatures can bite or sting
- Understand what you can do to avoid a problem
- Know what to do and whom to call if you get bitten or stung

### ***Things you can do to prevent a venomous bite or sting around your home***

- Remove litter, wood, paper, logs and debris from your yard.
- Wear heavy work gloves when working in your yard.
- Keep doors and windows tight fitting with good weather stripping.
- Have your home professionally sealed.
- Make sure that openings such as where plumbing pipes, air conditioning, swamp coolers or exhaust fans access your home are closed, sealed or encircled with double-sided sticky tape.
- Fill all cracks in the foundation of the home and around all water faucets.
- Look before you place your hand under or into something.
- Make periodic checks for bee hives or swarms; if found, have them immediately removed ***by pest control experts***. Do not try to remove or burn them out yourself.
- Be alert for trouble when operating equipment e.g., lawnmowers, chain saws, weed eaters, etc., that produce sound vibrations which can disturb a beehive or wasp nest.
- Examine all outside, line-dried clothing prior to bringing them inside the home.
- Do not leave shoes, boots, clothing, and towels outdoors.
- Wear shoes when outdoors, especially around the pool and at night.
- Call your local fire department for help in removing rattlesnakes that do not leave on their own.

***Things you can do to prevent a venomous bite or sting when hiking and camping in Arizona's great outdoors***

- Remain alert for snakes and be extra cautious when daily temperatures remain over 82° Fahrenheit. South-facing slopes and rocky areas are places where snake encounters are most likely to occur..
- Don't handle, touch or play with snakes - walk around them if you can.
- A long walking stick can be a good hiking companion. It can be used in an emergency to move a snake out of bite range.  
Bite range is between \_ to \_ the snake's body length.
- Step on the top of rocks or logs to get to a clear view of what's on the other side before stepping down.
- Don't blindly reach under bushes, rocks or logs.
- Check and shake bedding and clothes before each use.
- Don't wear scents of any kind
- Watch for bee hives, colonies or swarms when outdoors, and leave alone if found.
- Close and zip all tent closures in the evening.
- Remember that during our hot summer months rattlesnakes are much more active and hunt in the evening.
- Keep a good first aid kit with you. A snake-bite kit is **not** necessary.
- Wear long pants and lace-up leather shoes or boots that cover your ankles.

We hope you found this information to be of value, and please be careful when enjoying our great outdoors.

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