

For goodness **snakes**

Protecting yourself and the environment

by P. B. Smith, contributing writer

Maybe you don't lie awake at night worrying about snakes slithering under your bed, but the majority of humans have some degree of ophidiophobia, or fear of snakes. Local experts tell us the best way to avoid snakebite, and why we should welcome most snakes into our yards.

You live in a big city surrounded by concrete and roadways, so you don't have to ever worry about getting bitten by a snake, right?

Wrong. According to Dr. Rohit Shenoj of Texas Children's Hospital, they saw 20 cases of venomous and one case of non-venomous snakebites in their Emergency Room in 2004. Most were copperhead bites, with a few from water moccasins.

Yes, there are venomous snakes living cozily right here in Houston. But snuggled down next to them are more than a hundred species of beneficial snakes that are very important to the balance of nature. They keep rodent populations in check, and feast on venomous snakes. So how do you tell the difference between snakes you want and the ones you'd rather not encounter?

Local snake removal expert, Clint Pustejovsky, says the way to conquer fear of snakes is to educate yourself. He recommends several helpful books loaded with color photos so you can tell the difference between good snakes and snakes to avoid. *Texas Snakes: A Field Guide*, by James Dixon and John Werler, not only includes riveting color photos of each snake, but also a description of their habitat and range, so you know what to look for and where to look. Pustejovsky also conducts classes for Scout troops, schools and even private birthday parties to teach kids to respect snakes, and which snakes are dangerous.

Eric Duran, a naturalist with the Nature Discovery Center in Bellaire, also believes education is important. He keeps a milk snake at the Center for kids to see. Milk snakes are often mistaken for coral snakes because their coloring is similar, so Duran teaches a simple poem kids can remember to tell which snake is beneficial and which is dangerous: "*Red touch yellow, kill a fellow. Red touch black, friend of Jack.*" The gentle milk snake's red rings are banded by black rings, while the venomous coral snake's red rings are banded by yellow.

Duran has got some good tips to avoid snakebite:

- Stay on marked trails when hiking
- Never approach or pick up a snake

- Don't reach under or into favorite snake haunts—logs, rocks or wood piles—with your bare hands
- Elevate wood piles at least 18 inches off the ground to keep snakes out
- Keep grass trimmed and your yard free of brush and weeds where snakes can hide

It bothers Clint that people automatically want to kill every snake they see. "It doesn't make sense," he says. "Do people kill every bird that flies into their yard, every squirrel, every rabbit?"

You may be saying, "Sure, but do rabbits inflict deadly bites?" Well, only in Monty Python movies. But the fact is, snakebites, while truly terrifying, are rarely fatal. Only one in a thousand people die following a venomous snakebite, and they usually have some underlying medical condition that contributes to their death. Of the 20 cases at Texas Children's, only one had to be admitted for observation.

"For the most part, copperheads and water moccasin bites do cause pain, and the swelling can be considerable, but children do not usually need anti-venom," says Dr. Shenoj.

An average of five people die in the U.S. every year from snakebite, most from rattlesnakes which, fortunately, don't frequent cities. Contrast that to an average of 120 deaths a year from ant, bee and wasp stings, which concerns doctors more than snakebites because death from an insect sting can happen so quickly.

Most children get bitten by accident when they step on a snake or put their hands in low brush or a wood pile. A lot of older kids may try to poke snakes with a stick, with sometimes unhappy results. But all three of our experts say most cases of adults getting bitten by a venomous snake involve alcohol...

...and it's not the snake that's been drinking.

"Let's just say if you're operating under the influence of more beer and bravado than brainpower, don't try to shake hands with a snake—you will get bitten," Clint says.

You may not like the idea of a snake in your yard, but an efficient predator like a king snake can eat hundreds of mice a year, a statistic that makes your cat sound downright lazy. So the next time you see a snake, don't run for the shovel. Take the time to figure out what kind of snake it is. If it's beneficial, leave it alone. And if it's venomous, call Clint!



Allan Frederick of West U befriends a Honduran milk snake