

Ah, spring . . . and a snakebite alert

March 3 2014



Texas veterinarian warns that warmer weather puts people, pets at greater risk.

(HealthDay)—As temperatures rise and spring rains fall, snakes in the U.S. Southwest—including venomous snakes—leave their winter hideouts and become more active. That puts people and their pets at greater risk for painful snakebites, a veterinarian says.

"This is the time of year when all reptiles become more active. Even water turtles begin to shed their scutes for the shiny new ones underneath," said Dr. Jill Heatley.

"I spoke with one of our [emergency room](#) doctors the other day and said to be sure and tell [pet owners](#) that dogs and cats are likely to encounter snakes this time of year," Heatley, associate professor of [veterinary medicine](#) in the Small Animal Hospital at Texas A&M University's College of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences, said in a university news release. "If you believe your pet has been bitten, you

need to seek veterinary care and the doctor can determine what kind of treatment is necessary."

While dogs are typically bitten on their face or nose, cats are often struck on their paws. Heatley warned pet owners that snakebites require prompt medical attention since snake venom can spread quickly and result in kidney failure within 24 hours.

"The area that has been bitten will usually begin to swell almost immediately, and that's a tell-tale sign to look for," she noted.

Treatment for [snake bites](#) can be pricey, Heatley added. Patients bitten by a [venomous snake](#) may incur medical bills of \$50,000 or more. These people may need to be hospitalized for up to several weeks, receive antivenom and have damaged tissue treated.

Four types of [poisonous snakes](#) are found in the southwestern United States: [coral snake](#), copperhead, rattlesnake and cottonmouth or the water moccasin. However, Heatley said these snakes are typically not looking to bite people.

"The thing to remember about snakes is that, generally, they want to be left alone. They are probably more afraid of you," she explained. "The coral, copperhead and rattlesnake are almost never aggressive unless they are provoked. The cottonmouth has been known to be a little on the aggressive side, so you should be a little more wary of it, especially if you are near a creek or lake where they have been frequently seen."

Sometimes it's difficult to distinguish between venomous and non-venomous snakes. Heatley said venomous snakes likely have a triangular-shaped head. Meanwhile, coral snakes, which are part of the cobra family and can have very strong venom, are brightly colored with rows of yellow, red and black markings.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides more information on [venomous snakes](#).

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