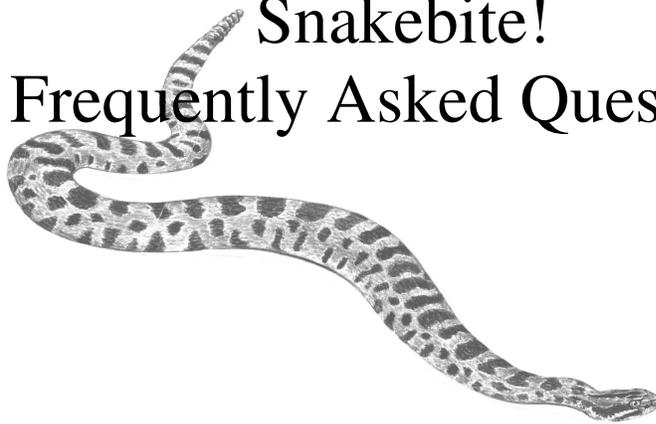




Snakebite!

Frequently Asked Questions



A note from the Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnake Recovery Team...

In order to maintain the accuracy of information about rattlesnakes in Ontario we are providing factual answers to some common questions. It is our hope that people armed with a fact based understanding of rattlesnakes will chose to co-exist with rattlesnakes as with other wildlife near their homes and cottages. Your support of the conservation of the eastern massasauga rattlesnake is greatly appreciated!

What is an eastern massasauga rattlesnake?

- The massasauga is a comparatively small snake (47-76 cm). It is grey or brownish grey with dark blotches on its back and three rows of smaller dark spots on both sides of its body.
- The massasauga is a member of the pit viper family of snakes, so called because of the heat sensing pits between their eyes and nostrils.
- The massasauga is Ontario's only venomous snake.

Where is the eastern massasauga rattlesnake found?

- It is found along the eastern shores of Georgian Bay, on the Bruce Peninsula, in Wainfleet Bog near Port Colborne, and within the city limits of La Salle and Windsor in south western Ontario.

How many snakes are there?

- Due to the snake's shy nature and ecology it is not possible for biologists to know exactly how many snakes there are. Populations do fluctuate from periods when there are high numbers to those of lower numbers depending on births, mortality, food sources etc...
- Snake encounters may increase during periods when snakes and people are more active. July and August see an increase in the number of people visiting the Georgian Bay area. This is also when the temperatures make it more suitable for snakes to be out and about. In the summer a gravid (pregnant) female will be more visible. She will spend more time in the open in order to bask in the sun to raise her body temperature in order to incubate her developing young.

- The continued presence of rattlesnakes is a reflection of the health of natural habitats that remain in Ontario

What legal protection does the eastern massasauga rattlesnake have?

- The federal Species at Risk Act, and the provincial Endangered Species Act have designated the eastern massasauga rattlesnake as a Threatened species.
- This designation legally protects the massasauga from being harassed, captured, killed, bought, or sold.
- A violation of either Act can result in a maximum fine of \$250,000 and/or imprisonment for up to one year. A violation for commercial purposes increases the penalty to a maximum fine of \$1,000,000.

Is this an aggressive snake?

- No. The massasauga is a relatively shy snake. They rely on their cryptic pattern and will often hide from view to avoid being detected.
- They will only strike when threatened.

What does the rattle do?

- Massasauga rattlesnakes often shake their rattle in alarm. When they rattle their tails, they are saying “I am here, don’t step on me, let me get away”. If they feel secure they will not rattle but wait for danger to pass.

What is venom?

- Venom consists of toxic proteins and digestive enzymes that kill prey and begin to break down tissue for easy digestion.

What is antivenom?

- Antivenom is a serum that contains antibodies that will neutralise a snake’s venom.
- The average venomous bite requires 10 to 15 vials of antivenom to treat. It is usually administered in a hospital by intravenous drip.

Is there a shortage of antivenom in Ontario?

- Hospitals in the range of the rattlesnake keep their own supply and the Toronto Zoo also stocks antivenom that is available to treat snakebite in Ontario.
- In the event of a shortfall, the Toronto Zoo has access to additional supplies through the Association of Zoos and Aquariums Antivenom Index

How often are people bitten by rattlesnakes?

- Between 1971 and 1998 an average of 2 bites were reported each year in Ontario. The number ranges from 0 to 9 bites per year.
- Many bites occur as a result of people engaging in risky behaviour such as trying to capture the rattlesnake.
- **No person has died from a rattlesnake bite in Ontario in more than 40 years.**

How can I avoid snakebite?

- Stay on the beaten path when walking in rattlesnake habitat
- Use a flashlight at night
- Always wear close toed boots or shoes when hiking. The massasauga has relatively small fangs that are not likely to penetrate leather-hiking boots or loose clothing
- Always watch where you are putting your hands and feet, do not reach into areas where you cannot see
- Do not pick up snakes or other wild animals. This is the most common cause of snakebites
- Do not harass, chase or threaten a snake. This is the second most common cause of snakebites and is illegal due to its protected status
- If you hear a rattlesnake, stop moving and determine the snake's location. Slowly step away and give the snake room to move away
- Protect your pets - keep dogs on a leash when walking through rattlesnake habitat

What do I do if I get bitten?

- Don't panic! Not all bites result in venom being injected. 25% of all rattlesnake bites are "dry" bites
- Stay calm and reduce movement
- Call emergency services and get to a hospital as quickly and safely as possible
- Clean the wound
- Remove jewellery on the affected limb
- **DO NOT** apply ice
- **DO NOT** apply a tourniquet
- **DO NOT** cut or apply suction to the bite area

An informative website, prepared by the Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnake Recovery Team, can be found at www.massasauga.ca

Seeing a massasauga in the wild is a unique and very special life experience - Enjoy it safely!