Different types of snake bites, and how to avoid them...

Written by Anthony Caponetto
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WARNING: While I mention venomous animals in my breakdown of the different types of bite scenarios, this handling advice is for NON-VENOMOUS SNAKES ONLY. In addition, this advice should not necessarily be applied to giant constrictors like Burmese pythons, Retics, and Anacondas. Giant constrictors open up an entirely different set of concerns that are beyond the scope of this article.

While I do have actual experience with all of the above, I do not want to hand out advice on working with dangerous snakes because I don't believe that learning to work with dangerous snakes should be done by training hands-on with an experienced keeper, not by reading on the internet.

A question I'm often asked is if I still get bitten by my snakes. My answer is always "Usually I only get bitten when I'm dealing with babies and not being careful. Adult snakes don't get me more than a few times a year."

The first thing you have to understand is what is causing that particular snake to strike at that particular moment. Understanding the different types of bites, particularly why they happen and how to identify them, makes it infinitely easier to avoid being actually bitten. In my experience with pythons and boas, feeding response is the culprit for 95% of striking in adult snakes. However, the majority of strikes/bites from babies are in defense. Younger snakes are still wet
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behind the (proverbial) ears and don't understand that you don't want to eat them. Adult snakes, on the other hand, have some experience and they know we're not a threat...however, they have also become conditioned to associate your presence with feeding time (whether you feed in another cage or not, your hand is still warm and the size of a rodent).

Defensive Bites
A snake biting in defense will typically give you plenty of fair warning, because in reality, they have nothing to gain by actually biting you. Some snakes will coil back and posture up to make themselves appear larger. Some will take deep breaths and exhale the air sharply and rapidly to create a hissing sound. Some snakes will vibrate their tails rapidly against leaf litter and other debris to create a buzzing sound. Rattlesnakes have taken this a step further and have rattles to make that buzzing even more pronounced. Other snakes, notably pit vipers like cottonmouths and eyelash vipers, will open their mouth and gape. It's also interesting to note that many venomous snakes will actually deliver a "dry" bite when acting in self defense, meaning they actually don't use any venom, as the bite is usually enough, and they want to save venom for the reason it's intended - subduing prey. This is not to say you should mess with venomous snakes - younger snakes haven't always developed the control over their venom glands yet, and it's likely they'll give you a nasty dose.

Feeding Response
A snake biting to subdue a prey animal is an entirely different bite - These bites typically involve no warning at all....the snake either holds still until the prey is within reach, or they quietly track it down, in either scenario making as little noise as possible. In captivity, feeding response bites can sometimes include a python or boa grabbing your hand and constricting it. Feeding bites, needless to say, are the ones you really want to avoid. I recently had a baby python grab my chest, just below the nipple, and attempt to constrict! I'll spare you the ensuing song and dance that I performed.

How do I avoid getting bitten?

For popular snakes (like small to medium sized boids) with a strong feeding response, I like to LIGHTLY touch them on the nose with a snake hook repeatedly until they understand that no food is present. I do this every time I have to remove them from the cage if I don't want to be bitten (with babies, I typically don't go to great lengths, as the bites are no worse than a paper cut). While tapping them on the nose with the hook in one hand, I will gently touch the snake with my free hand toward the middle of its body. Most snakes will get the picture by now, so I will then lift it up. If the snake lunges for my hand, it still hasn't gotten the picture, so I'll give it
another touch...or actually move the snake back with the hook if it does try to bite.

With snakes that just don't want to be handled or are scared of you, those are defensive bites you're going to be dodging, so your best bet is to use a snake hook to support the front third of the snake, while using your free hand to hold the rear third of the animal. Younger snakes will typically grow out of this. If you have a particularly grumpy subadult or adult, chances are that it's never going to learn to love you. :-(