



Nature Safety FAQs

We often get questions from folks about how to stay safe when exploring nature. Exploring nature can mean visiting a local park, taking a hike on a trail, picnicking at the beach, camping, or any activity that involves spending time in a natural space. Time in nature can be beneficial for your mental and physical health but may be difficult to enjoy if you have safety questions. All answers are specific to Hamilton, Ontario, and surrounding areas.

Animals

Are there snakes?

Yes, but the snakes in our area are shy and harmless. Far away in northern Ontario, there is one species of venomous snake, but it is unlikely to bite and its venom is easily treatable in a hospital.

Are there spiders?

Most spiders are shy and safe to be around. Venomous spiders are rare in Canada and you are unlikely to encounter them while enjoying nature. If you experience concerning symptoms after a spider bite, contact a healthcare professional.

Are there bears, wolves, and coyotes?

Bears and wolves are not present in this area, but may be found further north in Ontario. Coyotes may be around but are shy and easily scared away by making loud noises or throwing small objects. Never feed coyotes!

How can I be safe around pet dogs?

Dogs are the main animal to be cautious of around cities and local green spaces. Most dogs are friendly, but it's important to never approach unleashed dogs.

How can I be safe around raccoons?

Raccoons generally run away when people are nearby. To keep them away from your home, make sure your garbage and compost bins are well sealed. If you need to frighten one away, make loud noises.

Do wild bats bite people?

Wild bats are shy and almost never bite people. It is very rare for them to have rabies. Bat bites are more likely if a bat gets trapped in an enclosed space.

with a person. If a person is bitten by any wild or unknown mammal, it is common to get a rabies vaccine in a hospital as a precaution.

Should I worry about mosquito bites?

Mosquito bites can be annoying, but it is rare for them to carry diseases like West Nile or Malaria. Wear long clothes and bug spray as a precaution.

Should I worry about tick bites?

It's always good to be cautious. Ticks can carry diseases like Lyme Disease. You can protect yourself by wearing light-coloured, long sleeve shirts and pants, and tucking your pant cuffs into your socks. After a hike, check your body's creases for ticks. If you find one, contact your doctor or a public health clinic right away and if possible, put the tick in a bag or small container in the fridge so it can be identified or tested if needed. Most ticks in Hamilton are either dog ticks (which do not carry Lyme Disease) or deer ticks (which can carry Lyme Disease), so identification can often remove any concern of Lyme Disease. With the right medication, you are very unlikely to get Lyme Disease.

Can I touch snails?

Most snails in Canada are not risky to touch. Still, it's good practice to wash your hands after spending time in nature.

Are there rodents around?

Rodents are normally shy, easily scared, and unlikely to bite. However, they can carry disease so it's best to avoid touching them.

People

Should I be cautious of people I encounter in nature?

Most people you encounter will be like you– fellow folks spending some time in nature. They will typically say hello, or ignore you and continue on their own way. To be safe, bring a friend or family member when exploring natural areas and always let someone know where you are going. It is safer to go on adventures in groups. Always trust your instincts if you feel that someone may be unsafe.

Are there unhoused people?

Sometimes, people may live in the forest in tents or tarps. These people are facing homelessness for reasons we do not know, and should be given space and respect.

Sometimes, you may find glass, harm reduction supplies, or needles lying around. It is important to not touch these items unless you have the right safety equipment. Wear closed-toe shoes when you go outdoors for protection.

Plants and land

Is there quicksand?

Quicksand is rare and only appears near water under specific conditions. No one on our team has ever encountered it. Quicksand pockets are typically shallow and are not like in the movies.

Is there poison oak?

There is no poison oak in Ontario.

Is there poison ivy?

Yes, but it can be avoided by learning how to identify it and wearing clothes that cover exposed skin. Getting in contact with poison ivy may cause an itchy rash to form in a few hours, but for most people it is not an emergency. About 10-15% of people react more strongly, and about 10-15% do not react at all. If you do touch poison ivy, wash your body and clothes with soap to lessen the effects.

For more information on poison ivy, visit [ontario.ca](https://www.ontario.ca)

Are there other poisonous plants or fungi?

Poisonous plants and fungi do exist in Ontario. You should never eat a plant or mushroom you find outdoors unless you are with (or are) an experienced forager who is confident in the identification of the species. While mushrooms can be very poisonous to eat, none are poisonous to the touch.