

Snakes are an essential part of many food chains, both as food for other animals and as predators of small animals, for example, mice, rats and frogs. In some countries, snakes play a vital role in controlling populations of rats and mice.

There are many misconceptions concerning snakes, some of these are:

- a snake's tongue is poisonous,
- snakes die only after sunset,
- snakes are attracted by a saucer of milk,
- venomous snakes can be rendered harmless by milking their venom or removing their fangs
- Blue-tongued lizards keep snakes away
- Black snakes kill Browns

These have been clearly proven to be false.

What venomous snakes are found in Australia?

Australia is the only country in the world where there are more venomous than non-venomous species of snakes. Of the 155 species of land snakes in Australia, 93 are venomous, with most having short, permanently-erect fangs at the front of the mouth. In The North Coast & Northern Tablelands of NSW, the potentially dangerous snakes are the Tiger Snake, Eastern Brown Snake, Copperhead and Red-bellied Black Snakes, Marsh Snakes (mildly venomous). Copperheads are still active in colder climates so watch out for them in winter.

Venom

Snake venom is highly modified saliva and is formed in the venom glands at the rear of the snake's head. From there, it is carried by the venom ducts into the fangs, which are modified teeth having grooves along one side or a tiny hole through the tooth. In the gum behind each fang there is a reserve fang which grows over a period of time and which takes over when the original, or functional, fang is lost. As a result, there may appear to be more than two punctures when a bite occurs. The smaller teeth in the mouth behind the fangs are used for holding or assisting in ingesting the prey.

Neurotoxic/Coagulant/Haemolytic action:

"The venom is a very complex substance and can cause a range of reactions, depending on the type of snake involved. The main effect of the venom of most Australian venomous snakes is on parts of the nervous system, usually leading to difficulty

and balance. There may also be nausea and pain.

Some Australian snakes also have venom that disrupts kidney function and affects the way that blood normally clots, preventing clotting in some species and in others causing blood to be passed in the urine.

Factors affecting envenomation

Contrary to popular belief, death rarely results from the bite of a venomous snake. A snake may inject small or large amounts of venom, strike with its mouth closed, or bite but inject no venom at all. The relative size, age and health of the patient and the snake are also important factors, in general, for instance, a child will succumb more rapidly than a healthy adult. Yet another crucial factor is the site of the bite and the depth of injection. If the venom is released directly into a vein (which happens only rarely), symptoms could occur very quickly, possibly within minutes. These varied factors may help to explain why different people suffer widely differing reactions to snakebite - from no reaction whatever to some form of disability or even, very rarely, death.

Remember:

- If you see a snake, leave it alone. The chances of it being venomous are almost total. Snakes are generally shy, timid animals which will avoid conflict if given the opportunity.
- If a bite occurs, follow the recommended first aid and remain calm.
- Most snakes will only try to bite if they are cornered or unduly annoyed. Many bites occur when people go out of their way to try and kill a snake, even when, in most cases, it is not harming anyone.
- Never let children touch or collect snakes, if a young child says that a snake has bitten him or her, it is safer to believe them.

Further reading

Steve's Guide to snakes of the North Coast & Tablelands NSW
Australian Snakes: A Natural History; by Richard Shine. Published in 1991 by Reed Books, Balgowlah (reprinted in 1994). ISBN 0-7301-03 89-7.

Dangerous Australian Animals; by Straun K. Sutherland & Gy Noich. Published in 2000 by Hyland House Publishing Pty, Ltd.. Remington ISBN 1-86447-076-3.



SNAKES AROUND THE HOME N. T. W. C.



This information is presented by Northern Tablelands Wildlife Carers Incorporated
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Wildlife Carer can be contacted.

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What attracts snakes?

These snakes are very dangerous and care should be taken to minimise the chances of attracting them.

Snakes travel in search of food, mates and somewhere safe and dry to rest. Most mate in spring and early summer, and feed on small birds, mice, rats, skinks and frogs. In turn, mice and rats are attracted by grain and food scraps. To a snake, somewhere safe can be, for instance, under a large log, sheet of tin, tree stump, woodpile, or concrete slab. The opening into their resting place can be as small as 3cm across. Therefore, to a snake, a hole in the floor-boards of a bungalow, or a tiny gap in a wall next to a water heater, or ducted heating unit looks just as inviting as a hole under a stump in the bush.

Can I stop snakes entering my property?

Unfortunately, there is no sure way of completely preventing snakes from moving onto your property, particularly if it is a large bush block or open farm land. There is no product that will repel or attract snakes, at least nothing that is not equally toxic to people and other animals, such as your children, dog or cat.

Reducing the chances of a snake entering or staying on your property is a matter of common sense.

Do not leave piles of tin, garden cuttings, firewood or rubbish lying around for a snake to shelter under.

On a suburban block, avoid the accumulation of thick vegetation and rubbish on the outside of a fence. If living in the country, try to keep the area immediately around the house and garage free of rubbish and thick vegetation.

Avoid allowing grass to grow too long, especially near the house.

If you keep hens, other animals, or have feed stations for native birds or possums, ensure that all food is kept in secure containers and that the animal's areas are kept clean.

On an average-sized block of land (0.1 ha), a paling fence 1.55m high with horizontal supports on the inside will deter most snakes if dug into the ground by 30cm.

Ensure that all perimeter doors to your home are secure and do not have gaps. Spring-loaded weather strips correctly fitted to a door will prevent a vagrant snake entering your home.

Store all material, on your property and in sheds, off the ground.

To avoid snakebite, use common sense:

- * Always wear sensible clothing in areas where snakes may be living – sturdy boots, thick socks and jeans are usually adequate. Never wear sandals or thongs.
- * Never reach into or under hollows, logs or thick grass without looking first.
- * Always use a torch at night; many snakes are more active at night, particularly in summer.
- * Snakes cannot hear sounds as we can, but can detect vibration through the ground. Hence, they usually move away before you see them.

If you see a snake leave it alone. Maintain a watch on its movements from a safe distance. Remain in an open, area while observing its movements and keep other people away. Then ring for your local Wildlife group for help.

First aid for snakebite



Correct application of pressure bandage and immobilisation of the limb

Most bites occur on the feet, lower legs, hands and forearms. The recommended first aid is very effective and simple. If it is practised immediately, the chances of a complete recovery are excellent. In the event of a bite from a venomous snake:

- Keep the patient calm and the bitten limb as still as possible
- Apply a bandage(s) over the bitten area as soon as possible, starting from the lower portion of the limb
- Apply the bandage(s) as firmly as you would for a sprain
- Extend the bandage(s) as high as possible up the limb
- Immobilise a bitten leg with a splint
- Immobilise a bitten arm with a splint to the elbow and a sling
- Bring transport to the patient where possible
- Get medical help to the patient as soon as possible
- Keep the patient quiet and reassured; nothing will speed the spread of venom through the body (envenomation) more rapidly than continued movement and excessive anxiety.
- Assure them that help is on the way and watch closely for any symptoms and how long after the bite they occur.

- These observations will help the doctor determine the severity and rate of envenomation.
- Leave the bandage and splint on until you reach medical care. Only allow a doctor to remove the bandage.

Important points to remember for First Aid:

Do not cut or excise the bitten area. It does not help and can result in worse wounds; Do not apply an arterial tourniquet (a tie restricting blood flow);

Do not wash the bitten area. This is of little value as the snake may be identified using the venom on the skin; and

Do not give any alcohol or drugs which might suppress respiration. Antivenom is only given when signs of envenomation become apparent and should only ever be administered by a qualified physician.

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