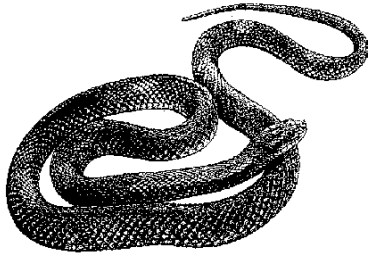


SNAKES AROUND THE HOME



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.*

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 Victoria, the potentially dangerous snakes are the Tiger Snake, Eastern and Western Brown Snakes, Copperheads and Red-bellied Black Snakes. Around Melbourne, Brown Snakes are more common to the west and northwest and Black Snakes to the northeast. The Tiger Snake and Copperhead are probably the most common snake in suburban areas, especially near water and more vegetated areas.

WHAT ATTRACTS SNAKES?

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

Snakes move 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 floorboards of a bungalow or a tiny gap next to a water heater, or ducted heating unit looks just as inviting as a hole under a stump in the bush.

HOW CAN I REDUCE THE NUMBER OF 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 farmland. 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.



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SOME WAYS OF REDUCING THE CHANCES OF SNAKES ON YOUR LAND ARE:

- *Do not leave piles of tin, firewood, garden cuttings 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 (0.1ha), 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.*

Remember, however, that 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.

FIRST AID FOR SNAKEBITE

Most bites occur on the feet, lower legs, hands and forearms. In the event of a bite from a venomous snake:

- *Immediately bind a broad elastic bandage firmly around the limb, starting on the bitten area. This should be tied as firmly as you would bind a sprained ankle and you should bind as much of the limb as possible. An elastic crepe bandage is ideal, but any flexible material can be used, for example, clothing torn into strips.*
- *Keep the limb as still as possible by binding it to a splint. This could be any available, straight piece of wood.*
- *Take transport to the patient wherever possible, keeping the patient's movement to a minimum.*
- *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.*



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- *Assure them that help is on the way and watch closely for any symptoms and note 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.*

IT IS IMPORTANT

- *not to cut or excise the bitten area. It does not help and can result in serious wounds,*
- *not to apply an arterial tourniquet (a tie restricting blood flow),*
- *not to wash the bitten area. This is of little value as the snake may be identified using the venom on the skin,*
- *not to 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.

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 on your property 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.*

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 in the tip. 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 behind the fangs are used for holding or assisting in ingesting the prey.

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



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mouth closed, or bite but inject no venom at all. The relative size, age and health of the patient and the snake determine the severity of the reaction. 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.

Taking into account these varied factors, there are many species of snake that could be considered the most dangerous. Until recently, the Coastal Taipan was considered the most venomous snake in Australia. It also ranks very highly in the world because of the large amounts of strong venom that it usually releases. However, work by the Commonwealth Serum Laboratories on the venom of the Inland Taipan, also known as the Small-scaled Snake, has shown this snake to have venom which is four or five times more potent than that of the Coastal Taipan. This may result in this species being looked upon as the most venomous snake in the world.

REMEMBER:

- *If you see a snake, leave it alone whenever possible. The chances of it being venomous are high. Snakes are generally shy, timid animals that will avoid conflict if given the opportunity.*
- *If a bite occurs, follow the recommended first aid and remain calm.*

FURTHER READING

Snakes of Australia: Dangerous and Harmless; by Peter Mirtschin and Richard Davis. Published in 1992 by Hill of Content Publishing, Melbourne. ISBN 0-85572-209-6

Australian Snakes: A Natural History; by Richard Shine. Published in 1991 by Reed Books, Balgowlah (reprinted in 1994). ISBN 0-7301-0389-7

The Snakes of Victoria; by John Coventry and Peter Robinson. Department of Conservation and Environment, East Melbourne. 1991

For further information regarding snakes, particularly in the Melbourne metropolitan area, contact: Herpetofauna Section, Melbourne Zoo, P.O. Box 74, Parkville, Victoria, 3052.

Acknowledgement: Herpetofauna Section, Melbourne Zoo

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