

Snake bite

WHAT IS A SNAKE BITE?

A snake bite occurs when a snake uses its fangs (teeth) to try to inject you with snake venom. Snakes are most likely to bite you in self-defence (for example, if someone is trying to harm or capture them).

There are three venomous snakes found in Victoria – brown, tiger and red-bellied black snakes. Snake bite is uncommon in Victoria, and envenomation (potentially life-threatening poisoning from the bite) is rare. Each year in Australia one to four deaths are caused by snake bite.

All snake bites (known and suspected) need urgent medical attention. If you are bitten by a snake, call triple zero (000) and remain still while waiting for an ambulance. If available, a firm bandage around the area where the bite occurred is also recommended.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Most snake bites do not deliver enough venom to cause major problems. If venom does enter your body, its effect will depend on the type of snake that bit you. It is also possible you will have no symptoms following a bite from a venomous snake.

Symptoms of snake bite include:

- nausea or vomiting
- headache
- abdominal pain
- double vision or blurred vision
- slurred speech
- sore or weak muscles
- shortness of breath
- bleeding from the bite site, or elsewhere
- dark or red urine
- pain or swelling at the bite site

- sudden collapse or seizure.

It can take some time for the venom to have an impact, which is why you may be kept in hospital for blood tests and observation for at least 12 hours from the time you were bitten.

TREATMENT

Blood tests are usually taken to identify whether you have been affected by the venom.

The doctor will assess your symptoms and review your blood tests to determine which treatment you need. The doctor may consult a clinical toxicologist (a doctor with expert knowledge in poisoning) for advice.

You may be given antivenom to counteract the effects of the snake venom. Bites from snakes found in Victoria are treated with brown or tiger antivenom. The antivenom selected will depend on your symptoms and the geographical area where you were bitten. In some cases, you may be given a dose of both antivenoms. The same dose of antivenom is used for adults and children.

Antivenom can cause an allergic reaction and is only given when necessary. If you receive antivenom you will be admitted to hospital. You will be monitored closely for potential reactions and need ongoing blood tests.

WHAT TO EXPECT

If you are given antivenom you are at risk of serum sickness. Serum sickness is a delayed reaction that can develop four to 14 days after receiving antivenom. The most common signs are:

- fever
- rash

- muscle or joint pain
- feeling unwell.

If you develop any of these signs, make an appointment to see your local doctor and tell them you have received antivenom. You may be prescribed a short course of prednisolone (a steroid medication) to help relieve your symptoms.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency, or if you have been bitten by a snake, call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

For other medical problems or any concerns see your local doctor or healthcare professional.

For health advice from a registered nurse you can call NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day on 1300 60 60 24 for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to interpreting services for callers not confident with English.

* Calls from mobiles may be charged at a higher rate.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional.
- Contact the Victorian Poisons Information Centre on 13 11 26.
- Visit Health Direct at www.healthdirect.gov.au/snake-bites

To receive this publication in an accessible format phone 9096 7770, using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or email emergencycare.clinicalnetwork@safercare.vic.gov.au

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