

# Snakebite treatment in Australia

## Firstly read the Preamble and then Why a snake bites

**These first two sections are important before the story on Snakebite treatment**

### Preamble

First Aid for Australian snakebite is quite simple and straightforward if you understand what you are actually trying to do.

Before going into snakebite we will do a short overview of Australian snakes, their nature and why they bite. Prevention is always better than cure and by understanding something about our snakes, you are well on the way to becoming reasonably snakebite proof.

What we have in our favour with Australian snakebite is that Australian venomous snakes have very short fangs; non-venomous snakes don't have fangs at all but they do have teeth. You should understand that a snake does not really want to bite you unless it intends to eat you.

There was a case some years back where a python tried to eat a little boy in Queensland. The boy was camping with his parents and was asleep in his tent. The little fellow awoke, feeling rather startled, with a python latched onto his face. The father was soon on the scene and sensibly got the python off from his son's face.

Pythons are non-venomous so of course the situation was not life threatening; though it must have been rather scary for the child. I was quite impressed by the little fellow, as he seemed rather philosophical about the whole ordeal and seemed to hold no grudge towards the confused snake.

Such a story grabbed the headlines and all the experts were trotted out for their opinions of how or why such a thing could happen with a 'harmless Carpet Python'. I was appalled by the ignorance of 'the experts'. If any one of them had thought about it, they would have known that the snake **had** tried to eat the boy or at least his head.

All Australian pythons, with the exception of the Black-headed Python (*Aspidites melanocephalus*) and the Woma (*Aspidites ramsayi*) have heat-sensing pits in their lower lips. Those snakes without heat-sensing pits, usually hunt by day, when they can see where they are going and identify their prey by movement or by smell using their forked tongue to follow a scent trail.

Pythons that have heat-sensing pits usually hunt at night or at least during the small hours. Most of these pythons are very slow moving and so are vulnerable to birds like eagles etc so, when those that could eat them are asleep, these pythons can be on the move.

Any warm-blooded creature will show up to the python as potential food. So if a wallaby were to come into range of a small python in the dark it would see its glow as too large to eat and just move on or ignore it.

If a large python is sitting in a tree and a flying fox were to arrive next to the python, the python would instantly pick it up as a glow with those specialised pits in its lips. The python will not necessarily eat the flying fox but if the python were hungry then the flying fox would not know what hit it.

That little boy in the tent would have had a blanket or sheet over him with his head exposed. To the python the head of a child would be about the size of a possum. You must remember that the snake has no

brains to analyse much at all, it just does what it does, and that is the same as it has been doing for millions of years. If it is hungry and comes across the glow of some warm blooded animal and that animal registers as about the right size to eat then that is dinner.

If that boy's body had been exposed, then the python would have registered it as too large to eat and would have most likely, passed him by. That snake would not have known that such a large body was attached to the possum it was about to eat.

If we class ourselves as intelligent then it must be our responsibility to try and understand the creatures that are not. If we do not try to understand what is around us then we are just unintelligent idiots that share the planet with other animals that have no chance of understanding anything. That little boy that the python mistook for a possum showed signs of being very intelligent and a useful human to have on the planet.

### **Why a snake bites.**

Simple logic can tell you that a snake does not want to bite you. There are a few ways that you can verify this. If snakes were out to bite people then we would have a special ward at the hospital for all the snakebite victims. There would also be ambulances on stand by, around the clock, for snakebite victims during the warmer months.

If you understand how a snake travels, then you will know that their body language means that they do not want to bite you.

A snake moves forward by using those ventral scales that are underneath and along the snake's body. For want of a better description these are as legs to the snake. You may note that those ventral scales are all facing backwards so it is impossible for a snake to travel backwards; it must travel forwards.

A snake will only travel at top speed to escape something that it perceives as a threat or to chase food that is moving fast; never to chase after something that it fears. Snakes don't hold grudges and snakes do not know that they might be venomous or non-venomous; as a matter of fact snakes don't **know** anything.

If a snake is travelling towards you and its head is flat on the ground or low to the ground and it is coming towards you quite fast for a snake, then it cannot see you. It sees an object but it can **not** see you as a live creature or a threat otherwise it would not travel towards you. That is why many people tell of a snake that slithered over their foot. The fact is that the snake did not see a foot. It just travelled over an object that it did not see as a threat. The snake had no idea that it had just passed by, the most dangerous animal on earth.

If the snake feels threatened and if the snake feels that it cannot escape then it might go into a defense display. People don't often get to see this display with the Brown snakes, as they are usually fast enough to exit the scene. The defense display of the Brown snake is typical of those snakes. Typically the Browns will raise the first part of their body throwing it into an S shape and that is when you will see those, often quite visible speckles that adorn the tummy of many browns.

Tiger Snakes are a much slower snake, so if they cannot escape they will often go into their scary mode. This means that they will usually flatten their neck and put their head up and back so as they can look as big and scary as possible. This is of course when it is likely to bite if you get too close. It cannot however, bite out much further than about half the length of its body. Remember it is trying to look scary, it does not want to bite; that is a last resort.

It does not know that it is venomous, it knows nothing. It does not understand yesterday, today or tomorrow. It does not know that it is a snake and that you are a human. It is just a small creature that is frightened of a big animal (you) that looks to be very scary

It is so stupid that if you are standing next to it and, if you have **not** received a bite because in the first instance it was not startled or, if it hasn't bitten you because you did not stand on it. Then, within a few seconds if you are not moving, it will forget that you were the one that frightened it to begin with. Compared to a Tiger snake a squid is a genius. Remember that you are dealing with an animal with less brainpower than a calamari.

So those who tell how a Tiger snake, flew at them or had a Tiger snake sit in wait for them or chased them around the paddock, are just talking nonsense. A Tiger snake can bite but those who perpetuate those stories of fantasy have some kind of a problem in their own head. It is just a pity that they have to take it out on the snake.

A Tiger snake in particular has an image problem because of its name. In the world of fantasy a tiger has an image of ferocity sometimes bordering on metaphor. As deadly as a Tiger snake is, if it had been called a Creampuff snake it **would** be viewed differently.

Snakes will bite for only two reasons and it does not matter if it is the most deadly snake or the most harmless snake. A snake will bite for '**food or fear**' and there is no other reason that a snake will bite.

I have had many bites since i first started handling snakes at the age of 7. Except for very few occasions, almost every bite i've received was to do with feeding. Typically, a snake has confused my hand for food when my **moving** hand was in a cage or close to a hungry snake at the wrong time.

I have spent thousands of hours handling countless deadly snakes and been bitten many times but never once, has a snake **attacked** me. With all the snake **attack** stories that abound, does that not sound strange?

### **Snakebite Treatment in Australia**

Because the fangs of Australian snakes are rather short compared to many other snakes from around the world we have at least that in our favour.

A short fang will deliver the venom just under the skin and so, unless you were to receive a bite into a vein then that is where the venom can be held. To hold the venom in place you can use a pressure bandage, which you can purchase, from any chemist shop.

The reality is however, that most people don't have a pressure bandage with them when they are bitten by a snake. So, what you should learn is what happens with a bite so as you can make do in any emergency.

Most pressure bandages are about as broad as your fist so if you don't have one you can tear up a t-shirt or use some other material; a pantyhose or stockings would do fine.

What you are to do is hold the venom in place till you get to hospital. So, let's say you are bitten on the leg. You start to wrap around and over the bite area firmly a few times and then from the bite site you keep wrapping the bandage moving up the limb from the bite. You may have to tear up a few pieces of clothing to give you enough bandages. Of course, a bite on the hand would need less bandage material than that for a leg.

Now the whole point of the exercise from here on is to keep the limb still, as the pressure bandage will only work if the limb is kept still. Now, as soon as possible, keep the whole body still. Unless you have been bitten in a vein, which is, quite rare, the venom will be sitting just under the skin and as you move the venom is carried up by way of the lymph which is just under the skin. That is why you must keep as still as possible.

If you are wearing a finger ring and you have been bitten on the hand, get the finger ring off. If you don't do that then once the swelling starts then you may not get it off; in a serious case the finger may come off.

Call an ambulance or get someone to drive you to hospital. If someone can warn the hospital, that you are on the way, all the better.

In Australia with the exception of Tasmania it is not advisable to wash the bite area. In Tasmania and the Islands of Bass Strait there is only one type of antivenom that is needed and that is Tiger Snake Antivenom. For Copperhead bites you only need Tiger antivenom. There is no such thing as Copperhead antivenom.

Once on the mainland of Australia any one of the five antivenoms could be used. Australia is the only country in the world where we have a venom test to identify which venom is the culprit. It only takes a few minutes to identify which group your bite belongs to and if antivenom is needed they will know which one to use.

Remember you may not need antivenom. Most bites don't require antivenom. However, you won't know that in advance so it is wise to treat every bite as serious. If you have washed off the venom from the snakebite area, a blood or urine test could suffice. If the snake grouping still cannot be identified then there is what you might call Australian Universal Antivenom. This antivenom is correctly called the Polyvalent Antivenom; and it does cover all the dangerously venomous snakes of Australia.

It is not however wise, to rely on the polyvalent, it should only be used in emergencies; it is very expensive and it is a massive dose when compared to the specific antivenoms. Remember that specific antivenom is specific so, it is always better to use that wherever possible.

It is a nonsense to ask "how long do you have when bitten by a snake?" That is like asking how long you have if you are hit by a car. It is a stupid question, just as the question does not make much sense when talking about snakebite. If you were bitten on a corn on the heel of your foot and your friend beside you were to be bitten directly into a vein then there would be two completely different stories regarding the gravity of each bite.

Just treat every bite sensibly and seriously and your chances of survival are excellent; and don't ever think that you are going to become immune to snakebite. Technically you can become immune but it is not as simple as that.

In Australia we have some of the best antivenoms in the world and so by learning to use a pressure bandage and keeping still you have one of the best chances of surviving a deadly snake bite anywhere on the planet. There can always be a tragedy and tragedies should be very rare, so let's keep it that way. Otherwise nobody should die from snakebite in Australia.

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