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Potentially deadly Irukandji Jellyfish on the Sunshine Coast

Most people will have seen jellyfish washed up on a beach, usually in large numbers.

Some people may have been stung by the so-called blue-bottle when weather conditions wash them on-shore, as has happened off Sunshine Coast beaches in recent months.

However, most people will not have heard of, let alone seen, the potentially deadly, tiny Irukandji jellyfish, named after a northern Queensland Indigenous tribe.

Sunshine Coast Hospital and Health Service (SCHHS) Senior Medical Officer Dr Simon Jensen said when weather conditions and water temperature are right, these tiny jellyfish can appear in the shallow water of bays, and on beaches, around the entire north of Australia, often in quite calm water, but also when the sea is rough from summer storms.

“They have been known for many years to occur from Broome to Townsville, and some northern Queensland beaches are closed from time to time, especially in summer.

“However, in recent years, possibly due to warming sea temperatures, they have been found further south as far as North-west Cape of Western Australia and Fraser Island of Queensland,” Dr Jensen said.

In the summer months for the past few years, including for the past month, they have been stinging swimmers around Fraser Island, mainly on the calm inland side, including the southern tip and off Inskip Point, where the Fraser Island ferry docks, north of Rainbow Beach. However, they have not yet been seen further south.

Dr Jensen said: “Last year several patients received care at the Gympie and Sunshine Coast University Hospitals in December and January. In the past month several victims have been flown to the Hervey Bay and Bundaberg Hospitals for medical care.

“The Irukandji jellyfish is a tiny, virtually colourless and transparent jellyfish, up to 2cm in diameter and with a single tentacle on each of its 4 corners up to 35cm long, and looks similar to other much less dangerous jellyfish. It may be invisible from above the water and very difficult to see for snorkelers and divers,” he said.
The sting of the tiny jellyfish may seem innocuous at first, mild and leaving little or no mark on the exposed skin. However, in the worst cases, within 10-20 minutes the symptoms may progress to abdominal cramps, fatigue, muscle aches and severe back pain, headache, sweating, and even chest pain.

Anyone stung by this jellyfish should seek urgent medical attention and immediately notify any lifeguards on duty.

Those experiencing symptoms beyond the sting site should be taken to the emergency department of the nearest hospital for assessment and treatment.

First aid should include;

- getting the victim, and any other people in the immediate area, from the water.
- applying vinegar to the apparent sting site and to any other exposed skin - this may stop any remaining sting cells, called nematocysts, from firing and worsening the symptoms.
- do not apply pressure bandaging as for a snakebite.
- do not apply hot water, often used for the pain of fish stings. It may hasten the absorption of venom into the bloodstream.

People can reduce the risk of being stung by doing a few simple things:

- do not pick up any jellyfish found on the beach, especially any fitting the above description.
- do not swim at beaches where there are signs warning of the presence of this jellyfish.
- when swimming anywhere from Rainbow Beach and north of there, strongly consider wearing a stinger suit, available at beachwear stores, which gives good protection against stings, although the exposed skin of the head and neck, hands and feet, still leaves some risk.

ENDS

Interview with Dr Simon Jensen available on request.

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