

Media statement

12 November 2019

Know how to avoid and how to respond to a snake bite

As the weather heats up and reptiles come out of hibernation, Sunshine Coast residents and visitors are being warned to watch out for snakes and know what to do in the case of a snake bite.

Sunshine Coast Hospital and Health Service (SCHHS) Senior Medical Officer Dr Simon Jensen said that although snakes can be encountered throughout the year in Queensland, they are more active in the summer months.

“As the temperatures rise so do snake sightings. Many species, including some venomous (dangerous) ones, can be found in residential areas, including in people’s houses, in supermarket car parks and on public beaches and sand dunes,” Dr Jensen said.

“There is also an increase in sightings, and in bites, during school and public holiday periods and during the peak periods of visitor numbers to the Sunshine Coast.”

“Everyone needs to be aware that we share the environment with a number of potentially dangerous snakes and should know what to do if bitten,” he said.

The SCHHS has recorded around 90 snake bite related presentations so far in 2019, with approximately 2/3 of these occurring in the first 3 months of the year. While most snake bites do not result in the victim becoming unwell, all bites should be taken seriously.

“If you are bitten by a snake in your garden or when out bushwalking, it is important to know what to do,” Dr Jensen said.

“For those bitten, the outlook is good if they can get to hospital promptly, but occasionally snake bite victims do not even know that they have been bitten.”

“Some people describe the bite as feeling like a scratch with a sharp object or like an insect sting; others describe it as a bump with little pain. Occasionally people might simply start to feel unwell and in this situation, it is wise that they check themselves for scratches and puncture marks if they have been out in the garden or walking in the bush.”

“Snake bite should always be considered if a child collapses while outside, or soon after being outside.”

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After a snake bite or suspected snake bite:

- Ensure that the snake has left the immediate area and is no longer a risk.
- Check that a collapsed patient is conscious, breathing and has a pulse.
- Call 000 for an ambulance for transport to the Emergency Department of the nearest hospital.
- Apply a pressure bandage as soon as possible: apply this over the bite site and then cover the entire limb. The bandage should be as tight as you would apply to a sprained ankle, which means it should be firm, but not uncomfortable.
- Immobilise the limb using a splint: any rigid object may be used as a splint, e.g. a piece of wood or tree branch or a rolled up newspaper
- Keep the patient still and encourage them to remain calm. Do not allow them to walk.
- Only non-alcoholic liquids should be given to the patient. Do not give an unwell victim food.

“Never use a tourniquet, never cut the bite wound or apply an electric current and never attempt to suck venom from the wound,” Dr Jensen said. “None of these actions will help the victim and all can cause further harm.”

“Also, do not wash the bite site as if there is venom on the skin, a swab of the site can be useful in helping to identify the likely snake species and guide doctors about which antivenom is required - if the victim becomes unwell and needs antivenom.”

Many bites occur when people try to kill snakes they find around the house. Medical and wildlife experts agree the best advice is to leave snakes alone and attempting to do so risks more bites and more victims. Snakes are also protected in Australia; killing them is illegal and fines can be applied. Many species help control rodent populations. Call a registered snake catcher if you would like the snake to be removed.

People can reduce their chances of encountering snakes by keeping their doors and windows and screens closed whenever they can. Keep grass around the house cut, and remove piles of building materials and garden debris from around the house.

Media opportunity

An interview opportunity with Dr Simon Jensen is available by request.

ENDS

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Hospital and Health Service

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