

Snake bites and your pet

Most snakes will try to avoid you and your pets but while you may simply walk away when you encounter a snake, dogs and cats will often harass the snake and get bitten as a result.

While hiking, stay on open paths. Keep your dog on leash and away from high grass and rocks where snakes like to rest. Do not let the dog explore holes or dig under rocks or logs. If you see a snake that sees you, remember that a snake can strike only a distance of half its body length. Give the snake time to just go away and slowly walk back the way you came. Snakes are not looking to interact with people or pets.

Do not let your pet examine dead snakes. They still have venomous fangs. Identification of a snake can assist in appropriate treatment for your pet but never handle a live snake. If collecting a dead snake always have appropriate gloves. Do not attempt to kill or capture the snake; this is not only dangerous to you, but snakes are a protected species by law.

If your pet is bitten by a snake, seek veterinary attention immediately. It is better to see a vet and be checked out rather than wait and be sorry.

HOW DO I IDENTIFY A SNAKE AND WHAT SHOULD I DO?

Snakes are prevalent in the warmer months (typically October until April). They are frequently seen in areas near a fresh water source such as a creek or dam.

The most common snakes in Victoria and South Australia are tiger, brown, black, red-bellied black and copperhead. In the south-eastern area of Queensland, brown and red-bellied black snakes, and occasionally the death adder and small eyed snake, are encountered.

Remain calm if your pet is bitten by a snake. If your pet has been bitten on the neck remove its collar. Keeping your pet as still as possible until reaching a veterinarian is critical to help reduce the movement of the venom from the bite site. Try to keep the bite site below the level of the heart.

Treatment options such as cold packs, ice, tourniquets, alcohol, bleeding the wound and trying to suck out venom should not be attempted in place of getting your pet to the vet — they just waste precious time.



Brown snake



Tiger snake

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WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IF A SNAKE BITES MY PET?

Signs of snake envenomation are seen within 1 to 24 hours after the pet is bitten. Different snake venom can have a variety of effects ranging from bleeding to neurological effects.

In many cases, the animal collapses or vomits shortly after being bitten. The animal may appear to recover but then signs gradually get worse. Dilated (enlarged) pupils are a common early sign, followed by hind leg weakness that may cause the animal to stagger. Eventually the weakness becomes paralysis and the animal cannot walk or even hold its head up. Breathing becomes rapid and shallow then increasingly difficult and this can lead to coma and death, especially if not treated. Other signs that can be seen include trembling, drooling, depression, bleeding from wounds, blood in the urine or vomit, and pale gums.

WHAT WILL THE VET DO WHEN THEY TREAT MY PET?

When you arrive at the vet with a pet that may have been bitten by a snake, a series of tests may be recommended including a snake venom detection kit. After positive identification the vet will administer anti-venom under close observation. Your pet will then be hospitalised for intensive monitoring and supportive care such as intravenous fluids and pain relief via a drip.

WHAT IS THE PROGNOSIS FOR MY PET?

Prognosis can range from extremely guarded to good depending on the speed of treatment being started and the amount of venom injected. Quick action on the owner's part improves the prognosis. A venomous snake bite is a life-threatening emergency. Close to 6,500 pets are bitten by snakes each year in Australia. Approximately two thirds of these animals received antivenom. With antivenom treatment 91% of cats and 75% of dogs survived, whereas 66% of cats and only 31% of dogs survived without antivenom.

Severely envenomated animals may still take weeks to return to full health, because of the widespread effects of the venom (particularly muscle damage). With prompt treatment many animals recover within 1-2 days, however hospital treatment may be as long as a week in severe cases with a further 2-3 weeks of rest at home to recuperate.

HOW CAN I REPEL SNAKES FROM MY PROPERTY?

To reduce the risk of snakes gathering on your property:

- Dig your fence a foot into the ground.
- Keep your yard tidy by clearing undergrowth, filling holes in the ground, mowing the lawn, and clearing away toys and tools which make great hiding places for snakes.
- Keep walkways clear of brush, flowers and shrubs.
- Clean up any spilled food, fruit or bird seed, which can attract rodents, and therefore snakes.
- Store firewood away from the house.

Always seek professional help in removal of a snake from your property.

REMEMBER

- Remain calm
- Do not try to catch the snake
- Keep your pet as still as possible – carry it to your car if possible
- Go directly to the nearest veterinary clinic, even if your pet appears to have recovered
- Prognosis is good with timely antivenom treatment