

With the weather warming up it's the perfect time to lace up in your hiking boots & enjoy the outdoors. However, humans aren't the only species to enjoy the warm weather, with the sun beckoning our reptiles like lizards, turtles and you guessed it, snakes.

Being cold-blooded (ectotherms), reptiles use the sun to regulate their internal body temperature, speeding up their metabolism and aiding in digestion to allow them to move more energy efficiently.

Fear of snakes is common – but we must remember one of the main reasons for hiking is literally to step into nature and that means sharing the trails with the Australian wildlife that call the bush their home – snakes included.

Snakes: Busting Common Misconceptions

Snakes perform a vital role in maintaining a healthy ecosystem of our Australian bush. It is *illegal* to capture, injure or kill snakes in the wild and like other native Australian wildlife, they are *protected* under the Wildlife Act 1975.

A snake's instinct when threatened is to *retreat* – not attack and by no means do they perceive humans as a food source, with their prey ranging from frogs, birds and lizards to small mammals.

Snakes are naturally shy and inclined to avoid any threats and that includes humans. Being aware of their instinctive behaviours can help us understand why the following course of action, is the best course of action.

What to do if you see a snake on the trail?



1. Be aware, be cautious but don't let fear cause you to react in a way that may be considered aggressive, threatening or that has the potential to make the snake feel cornered. Stay calm and do not approach it – that means don't shout out, run or move suddenly, or do anything to provoke it.
2. Slowly back away, observing the snake to determine its direction.
3. Head in the opposite direction or wait for it to move from a safe distance, with several metres between you and the snake. Once the snake is aware of your presence, it'll likely slither undercover, leaving the trail free. Alternatively if it is safe to do so you can walk around it, leaving plenty of space between you and the snake.

Precautions and prevention

Unless you are provoking the snake in some way like entering its strike zone by attempting to catch or kill it, it is extremely unlikely you'll be bitten by a snake. There may be the rare circumstance where you happen to stumble on a basking snake and step on it unaware – which means it pays to be cautious on the trail as snakes are naturally well camouflaged.

Although snake bites are rare in Australia, they are more likely to occur between the months of October and January, when the weather is warmer. However, it's important to be vigilant on the trail all-year round by taking these precautions.

Wear protective shoes and clothing.



Snake bites to hikers usually occur to the lower legs such as the ankles. It's recommended that you wear lightweight long pants while bushwalking to keep minimal skin exposed and gaiters as an additional protective layer. All of Australia's venomous snakes are elapids or front-fanged snakes. Their fangs are short, making it difficult for them to pierce through clothing to inject venom through the skin.

Needless to say it's important to wear enclosed footwear. Sturdy footwear not only provide a protective layer but can increase the vibrations your foot strike makes on the ground, giving the snake an opportunity to sense you approaching and to retreat before you encounter it or are even aware of its presence. Using hiking poles in long grass can also encourage a snake to leave before you arrive.

What to do if your trail buddy gets bitten by a snake?

Immediately call emergency services

The puncture points of a snake bite can be near undetectable to the untrained eye unless swelling or bleeding. It can also be challenging to determine whether it's a dry bite (no venom is released) or a venomous bite by a snake such as a red-bellied black snake, brown snake or tiger snake. It's also important to note that a juvenile snake from these venomous Australian species can be just as lethal as the bite of an adult if not treated.

Assume any bite is venomous and life-threatening and take action by immediately calling emergency services (000) for an ambulance.

Symptoms of a venomous bite may include headache, muscle fatigue, blurred vision, vomiting and nausea, bleeding or swelling from the puncture point and a burning, tingling or stinging sensation - but do not wait. The longer the time the bite is left unattended, the greater the risk.

Keep the snake bite victim calm and immobilised.

Keeping the victim still can literally save their life, so lie them down in a stationary position. Allowing the patient to lie down may also help minimise the body's response to shock. As long as the snake has retreated and there is no further danger, this can be done at the place the bite occurred to minimise unnecessary movement and to take immediate action. Do not move the patient unless they are at immediate risk.

Unlike common belief that venom travels through the bloodstream after a bite, it moves through the lymphatic system – a part of your circulatory system involved in your body's immune response and a passageway for infection-fighting white blood cells (lymphocytes).

Lymph or lymphatic fluid moves when you do – so walking and running will increase the spread of venom up the body, as will an increased heart rate so reassure the patient to keep them calm.

Apply a pressure immobilisation bandage available at BBW for \$

Most bites occur to the limbs such as arm or leg and it's critical to restrict the spread of venom through the lymphatic system.

1. Wrap the limb at the bite site. It should be tight against the skin so it's difficult to slide a finger beneath the pressure immobilisation bandage. A Snake Bandage features a tension indicator which turns from rectangle to square when proper tension has been achieved.
2. Apply a second elasticised roller bandage beginning slightly above the toes or fingers of the bitten arm or leg and wrap it firmly up the entire length of the limb in a spiral motion. Keeping the toe or fingertips exposed allows you to keep track of the snake bite victim's circulation. If an elasticised roller bandage isn't on hand, use any stretchy fabric available such as tights or torn t-shirts.
3. Immobilise the limb to prevent movement using a splint. A sturdy stick can function as a make-shift splint by tying it securely to the limb with bandages or any fabric. Alternatively a sling can be used to support a bitten arm.
4. Record the time of bite and mark the bite site with a pen. If nothing else is available, the bite site can be marked with mud or dirt on the bandage to easily identify its location.
5. Keep the patient immobile, calm and reassure them that help is coming until the ambulance arrives and medical experts can take over.

The DON'Ts of snake bite treatment

- **DON'T wash the wound or clothing** - Excess traces of venom can be used by medical experts to identify the anti-venom required to treat the patient. If no venom is available, the generic polyvalent anti-venom may be used for treatment so *don't attempt to kill or catch the snake* for identification purposes. It may help to remember the colouration of the snake or take a photo, but not if it interferes with treating the patient or your safety.
- **DON'T use a tourniquet** - A tourniquet can inhibit blood flow to the point where it can cause permanent damage to the limb.
- **DON'T allow the bite victim to smoke, consume caffeinated drinks or alcohol, even for pain relief** – Smoking and caffeine can cause heart rate to increase, and alcohol can have a blood-thinning effect.
- **DON'T try to suck out or drain the venom by cutting the skin** – This is dangerous and *not* effective.
- **DON'T attempt to treat the swelling with ice** – This is *not* effective.