

HERVEY BAY VETERINARY SURGERY

Owner Information Series

SNAKES AND THEIR BITES

Armed with curiosity and natural hunting instincts it is not uncommon for our favourite four legged friends to cross paths with a snake. Even city dogs and cats can have these encounters in local parks particularly those near bodies of water such as lakes and beaches.

As snakes hibernate or are inactive during cold weather, snakebites usually occur in the summer months. Australia has a large number of venomous snakes but the tiger snake and brown snake account for the majority of snakebites in domestic pets.

SIGNS OF SNAKEBITE

Several factors will determine what sort of reaction your pet has to a snakebite. The type of snake (some species of snake are more venomous than others), the amount of venom injected (depends on the size and maturity of the snake) and the site of the snakebite are all contributing factors.

Dogs and cats are most often bitten around the head and limbs. Usually the closer the bite is to the heart the quicker the venom will be absorbed into the pet's system and distributed around the body.

At the beginning of summer, when snakes first come out, their venom glands tend to be fuller and their bites at this time are much more severe. The length of time since the snake last struck can also be a contributing factor.

The usual signs of snakebite by a tiger or brown snake are:

- Sudden weakness followed by collapse
- Shaking or twitching of the muscles
- Vomiting
- Dilated pupils not responsive to light
- In the later stages paralysis may occur and your pet may have blood in his or her urine

FIRST AID

If you suspect your pet has been bitten by a snake you should immobilise your pet and try to keep it as quiet as possible, it is vital you get your pet to a veterinarian as quickly as possible, the sooner your pet is treated the better its chances of survival.

If possible try to identify the snake, or get a description of its colour and approximate size, there are several types of antivenoms available and it will assist your veterinarian to determine the correct one.

VETERINARY TREATMENT

Firstly your veterinarian will examine your pet to determine whether it has been bitten, and will assess your pet to determine the stage of reaction and what treatment is required.

Veterinary treatment varies slightly with each individual case, but usually consists of intravenous fluids and the administration of antivenom to neutralise the snake venom in the pet's body.

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Antihistamines and other drugs may also be administered to minimise the risk of shock reaction.

RECOVERY

In some cases recovery from a snakebite occurs within 24 to 48 hours if your pet receives prompt veterinary attention.

Approximately 80% of pets survive snakebites if treated quickly, the survival rate is much lower however for pets that are left untreated, and death often occurs.

Pets recovering from snakebites often need intensive and prolonged nursing care until they make a full recovery.

ANTIVENOM

Antivenom is produced by gradually immunizing horses to the venom of a species of snake. The horse's blood is then collected and the serum is separated and purified to make antivenom, containing specific antibodies to the toxins in the snake venom.

Snake antivenoms are expensive to produce and have limited shelf life; these factors are reflected in their high costs.

THE DEADLY BITE!

When a snake bites an animal, it injects its venom via the fangs into the tissue below the skin. Venom is rapidly absorbed from the site of the bite and carried mainly by the lymphatic system into the animal's circulation.

Snake venoms carry a large range of toxins that damage tissues and impair many of the body's vital functions; they attack the nervous system and interfere with the body's clotting mechanisms.

Remember... if your pet is bitten DO NOT try to catch or kill the snake, all Australian snakes are protected and you may expose yourself to unnecessary danger.