

Safety Alert

January 2015



SNAKE PRECAUTIONS

Recently an employee was bitten by a Snake during work in the north west of the state. A compression bandage was applied and an ambulance called, the contractor was taken to a nearby town hospital which was not equipped to deal with snake bite so he was transferred by air to another hospital in Adelaide where he received treatment and fully recovered. This recent incident is a timely reminder that the wet weather has created ideal conditions for snakes because their food is plentiful. They are expected to be very prevalent this summer and precautions need to be taken.

A few years ago another employee was attacked by a snake, fortunately they were wearing long trousers and safety boots so the snake's fangs did not make contact with the skin. The snake was identified but not harmed, medical attention was sought and this confirmed no harm had occurred. The first strike was to a leg which was protected by loose long trousers, and the second to the rear of a boot.

The attack occurred in a grassed area adjacent to a creek. Creeks provide food and water for snakes so can be expected in such areas at this time of year. Some but not all breeds of snake will seek to avoid people but others such as Tiger Snakes may attack if you come close. Tiger snakes are one of the more aggressive species. Naturally if you stand on any snake it will attack in self defence.

It is VicRoads policy that long trousers and safety boots are worn outdoors on work sites for a number of safety reasons. In this instance the trousers and boots prevented the snake's fangs penetrating the employee's skin so an additional safety advantage was gained in this instance. However, you cannot rely on trousers particularly if they are touching the limbs where the snake strikes. Long gaiters designed to protect against snake bites are more effective if you need to venture into areas likely to be habited by snakes.

How to avoid snake bites: Ways to avoid snake bites include:

- Avoid areas where snakes are hard to see, such as long grass. Keep grass cut short around offices and worksites.
- Look carefully where you are walking – snakes are well camouflaged.
- Wear substantial footwear and long loose fitting trousers. Hiking gaiters are a good idea if you need to venture into grassed areas.
- Leave snakes alone particularly if they have been provoked or if they are injured.
- Know appropriate first aid. Training in snake bite first aid is recommended for those who need to work in the field.
- Do not put hands or feet in or under logs, rocks, tin, hollows or crevices and watch where you are walking.
- Keep homes and workplaces free of food or shelter for rodents.

First aid

- Keep the patient still and as calm as possible and bring transport to them.
- Maintain vital functions.
- Immediately apply a pressure immobilisation bandage (in an emergency, clothing strips or pantyhose could be used) over the bite site at the same pressure as for a sprain without blocking circulation.
- Apply a bandage over the top of clothing to as much of the rest of the bitten limb as possible.
- Apply a splint to keep the limb still.

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- Seek medical help immediately (for example, call 000).
- If you can describe the snake this will assist treatment but do not kill it or try to catch it.
- Do not wash the wound as this will remove venom which can be used to identify the snake species.
- Do not use a tourniquet.
- Do not cut or suck the wound.
- Do not give alcohol or food to the patient.

Snake venoms are relatively slow acting but prior consumption of alcohol or drugs, health and age of the victim and allergies may complicate their effects.

Tiger snakes prefer “mosaic habitats” consisting of agricultural areas interspersed with bushland and which are well-watered by creeks, rivers, dams and the like. They seek overgrown vegetation at ground level and lots of cover, especially man-made cover in the form of tin sheeting. They love rubbish heaps on the edge of town and are common in suburbs with rocky, overgrown gardens, north-facing slopes, pools and fish ponds. The suburbs bordering rivers, creeks and water have the most tiger snakes, and of all the Australian capital cities, Melbourne is by far the most heavily infested with tiger snakes.

Tiger snakes are common, but in the last 50 years their numbers have dropped in many areas. Tiger snakes eat frogs, and the frogs have disappeared due to swamp draining — so, too, have the snakes.

In the inner Melbourne suburbs, however, tiger snake numbers appear to be on the increase as the snakes adapt to the urban landscape. They favour older, more overgrown suburbs where rubbish is more often left along back fence lines. Frogs are scarce in many suburbs, but the “urban snakes” seem to subsist well on rodents.



The Tiger Snake is a thick-set snake that typically reaches a length of 1 metre.