

Snake Bite 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.

In Western Australia, our venomous snakes are the Brown snake family (Dugites & Gwardars), Tiger snakes, the Black snake family (Mulga / King Brown) and Death Adders.



Juvenile brown snakes typically display a black coloured nape and dorsal area of their head that usually fades and sometimes disappears with age

Juvenile Brown snake

brown snake



This Dugite is of relatively dark colouration and displays only minimal black scale flecking which on some specimens is often more predominant.

Adult



snake



Death Adder

Tiger

While bush walking, 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. The same goes for you! Identification of a snake can assist in appropriate treatment for your pet but never handle a live snake, & be extremely cautious even if it is dead. Please do not attempt to kill or capture the snake; this is not only dangerous to you, but snakes are a protected species by law.

Q. What if I see my pet get bitten by a snake?

Seek veterinary attention immediately. Call ahead to let the vet know you're on your way.

Remain calm and keep your pet as still as possible until reaching a veterinarian - this is important to help reduce the movement of the venom from the bite site. Try to keep the bite site below the level of the heart.

Do not waste time in looking for the bite site, it often cannot be found. Treatment options such as cold packs, ice, tourniquets, alcohol, bleeding the wound and trying to suck out venom should not be attempted— they just waste precious time, & are largely ineffective.

Q. What if I am NOT SURE that my pet has been bitten, but SUSPECT it? (eg a snake was seen near an animal; or your animal has yelped while in bushland etc)

It is always recommended to seek veterinary attention immediately.

Your vet will assess your pet, and discuss the options.

There are tests that can be run to help us determine if snake bite occurred. Sometimes these need to be repeated over time, to ensure that venom is not taking hold.

Sometimes keeping an animal in hospital to observe & monitor, with a drip in ready to start treatment if warranted, is a good idea.

At the very least, owners should be aware of signs to watch for that suggest snake bite, & watch their pet very closely for the following 24hours.

Q. What will happen if my pet is bitten?

Signs of snake envenomation are seen within 1 to 24 hours after the pet is bitten - it can be very variable.

In many cases, the animal may collapse or vomit / pass diarrhoea, or have funny breathing shortly after being bitten. The animal may then appear to recover.... but then signs gradually get worse. So if you see any of these immediate signs, it is a serious warning that your pet needs veterinary attention.

As the snake venom takes effect (in 1-24hours after the bite), signs include:

- Dilated (enlarged) pupils, and an inability to blink
- Hind leg weakness. This may cause the animal to stagger, or walk abnormally.
- The weakness becomes paralysis, and the animal cannot walk or hold its head up.
- Breathing becomes rapid and shallow then increasingly difficult, and this can lead to coma
- Trembling, drooling & depression.
- Most snake venoms also causes bleeding disorders, so look for bleeding from wounds, blood in the urine (can look red or brown), blood in vomit or faeces, and pale gums.

Q. How will the vet try to determine if my pet has been bitten (if I am not sure)?

There are a series of tests that, together, can help to make the diagnosis of snake bite. No one test alone is complete, and it is often not black & white.

There are other diseases & toxicities that can “mimic” or look like snake bite.

Clinical exam, with a neurological assessment, is also essential.

There is a snake venom detection kit that can be run on a blood sample or urine sample, depending on the suspected time of bite.

There are tests that assess blood clotting, and muscle damage (both of which can be abnormal with snake bite).

Q. What will the vet do to treat my pet for snake bite?

If you know your pet was bitten, or if the tests confirm it, specific treatment will be started.

Antivenom given carefully via a drip is essential. Sometime multiple vials are needed. Your pet will require close monitoring during the administration of antivenom.

Your pet will need to be kept on a drip, to try and prevent kidney damage from the venom, sometimes for days.

Pain relief, for muscle damage and subsequent pain, is essential.

In severe cases pets can need blood or plasma transfusions.

In extreme cases, they will need to be put on a ventilator to breath for them.

Sometimes snake bite pets will need to be transferred to emergency / 24hour clinics for intense, 24/7 care.

Q. What is the prognosis for my pet?

Prognosis can range from extremely poor to very good.

This depends on the speed of treatment being started, the amount of venom injected, the type of snake and the overall health of the pet.

A venomous snake bite is a life-threatening emergency.

Severely envenomated animals may still take weeks to return to full health, because of the widespread effects of the venom (particularly muscle damage). In some cases, hospital treatment may be required for days to weeks.

Q. How can I repel snakes from my property?

Realistically it can be very hard to prevent our pets from coming in to contact with snakes.

Digging your fence a foot into the ground is useful, if practical.

Keeping 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.

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.

Note that PET INSURANCE can be extremely useful in the event of snake bite. Treatment is often intensive, can be prolonged, and is nearly always expensive given the high cost of antivenom.

It can be impossible to know how much snake bite treatment will cost at the start, as a lot depends on how individual animals respond to the antivenom and treatment along the way.