



National Prescribing Service Limited



MEDIA RELEASE

12 January 2007

Caution needed over snake bites

With summer upon us it is important for people in regional and rural areas to be cautious of snakes and to be aware of necessary first aid procedures if bitten, according to Dr Geoff Isbister, toxicologist from Charles Darwin University, Newcastle Mater Hospital, and the NSW and Queensland Poisons Information Centres, writing in *Australian Prescriber*.

Australia's snakes are unique and many are poisonous. The major Australian snakes are the brown snakes, tiger snakes, mulga/black snakes, taipans and death adders.

Estimates suggest that between 500 and 3000 snake bites occur annually in Australia, mostly in the warmer months in rural and regional areas. Between one and four deaths occur each year, most commonly from brown snake bites.

Bites from each of the five major snake groups cause medical symptoms and the severity and type of symptoms depend not only on the type of snake but also on how much venom was injected by the bite. Many snake bites do not result in an injection of venom, but whether this has occurred cannot be immediately determined so patients must be kept under observation.

The type of snake that caused the bite determines the type of antivenom that may be required, therefore identifying the snake that caused the bite will assist doctors with treatment.

When a bite occurs it is important to give first aid:

1. The bite site should not be washed so that the areas can be swabbed to detect the venom.
2. Apply a broad bandage.
3. The patient should remain completely still.
4. The bandage should only be removed once the patient is in a hospital stocked with antivenom.

For the complete article visit the Australian Prescriber website www.australianprescriber.com. Australian Prescriber is an independent peer-reviewed journal providing critical commentary on therapeutic topics for health professionals. It is published by National Prescribing Service Limited (NPS), an independent, non-profit organisation funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.

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