

Snakes

No. 19


Dangerous Queensland snakes:

Twelve potentially dangerous snakes occur in Queensland. The risk posed to people by these snakes depends on the venom toxicity, venom yield, fang length, temperament and bite frequency of each species.

No case of real or suspected snakebite should be regarded as trivial. Appropriate first aid should be applied and the patient promptly placed under medical supervision.

The most crucial step in preventing venom spread is a pressure immobilisation technique:

- € Apply a firm broad bandage or similar (in an emergency, clothing strips or pantyhose could be used) over the bite site at the same pressure as for a sprain. Do not block circulation.
- € Apply a further bandage over as much of the rest of the bitten limb as practical. It is often easier to go over the top of clothing such as jeans rather than remove clothing.
- € Ensure the bitten limb is kept motionless by applying a splint and advising the patient not to use the limb at all.

This technique can be used for all Australian snakebites as well as bites from suspected funnel web spiders (see Rural Safety Link 20).

For further information on snakes, check the Queensland Museum's Web Page on: <http://www.Qmuseum.qld.gov.au>

Where are they found?

- € **Taipans.** There are 2 kinds – **Coastal and Western Taipans.** The **Coastal Taipan** - regarded as Queensland's most dangerous snake - is found along the length of eastern, coastal Queensland in dry forests, grasslands and cultivated areas. The **Western Taipan** is restricted to the ashy downs of the south-west corner. This snake has the most toxic venom of any land snake but is rated the sixth most dangerous partly because of its remote habitat.
- € **Black Snakes.** The second most dangerous snake is the **Mulga Snake**, also known as the **King Brown Snake**. This is actually one of the "black snakes" found throughout Queensland except for the wetter south-east corner. It is common in arid and semi-arid areas. **Collett's Black Snake**, **Red-bellied Black Snake** and **Spotted Black Snake** rate eighth, ninth and tenth in terms of potential risk. Collett's is restricted to the black soil plains of central Queensland, Red-bellied to the east coast and Spotted Black Snake to the south-east corner.
- € **Death Adders.** The **Common Death Adder** rates third most dangerous. It is found across the Gulf of Carpentaria,

the base of Cape York and down the eastern half of Queensland. It inhabits a range of habitats and is only really absent from rainforest. Closely related species of Death Adders inhabit the arid interior of the State and Cape York but are much smaller and not yet implicated in serious bites.

€ **Brown Snakes. The Eastern Brown Snake** ranks fourth and is the most commonly encountered dangerous snake over much of Queensland. This snake is only absent from rainforest and frequently found around human habitation. The related **Western Brown Snake** which inhabits arid and semi-arid regions of Queensland rates sixth. Three other species of Brown Snake occur in Queensland – **Ingram's Brown Snake, Speckled Brown Snake and Ringed Brown Snake**. Bites from the latter two are unlikely to prove fatal. The former is a poorly known species from north-west Queensland and likely to be potentially dangerous because of its size and similarity to the Eastern Brown Snake.

€ **Tiger Snake.** This is really a snake of Southern Australia and rates the fifth most dangerous Queensland snake. It is restricted to the coast and near mountains of the south-east corner of Queensland where it is patchily distributed through heaths, rainforests and wallum habitats.

€ **Rough-scaled Snake.** This occurs in the tall open forests, heaths and rainforest of coastal north-east and south-east Queensland. It is the eleventh most dangerous Queensland snake.

€ **Small-eyed Snake.** The smallest and rated twelfth most dangerous, this is found in forest and heath through eastern Queensland south of Cairns and commonly occurs in settled areas.

Snake identification:

Snake identification is difficult. Colour seems an obvious feature but in many cases, colour patterns are variable. This is particularly true with very dangerous snakes where individuals of the same species may be very different in colour and different species can be similar.

Queensland Museum and similar agencies can provide expert identification.

Snakebite:

All cases of real or suspected snakebite should be treated as a medical emergency.

The overwhelming majority of bites occur when the victim has provoked the snake by attempting to catch, kill or handle it. Accidental bites do occur but are less frequent. Snakebites can therefore often be regarded as a self-inflicted and largely preventable injury.

It is important to understand why and how snakes bite. Snakes are not aggressive and do not seek confrontation with humans. However they may retaliate if provoked.

Some snakes, such as the Eastern Brown Snake, are "nervous" and very easily provoked. Others – like the Red-bellied Black Snake – are more likely to attempt to deter threats by displays of hissing, flaring the body and thrashing around. As a last resort, they will bite. Once provoked, Eastern Browns and Coastal Taipans may deliver several bites in quick succession while others such as the Mulga Snake will grip the victim and chew.

Injection of venom may or may not accompany bites. A warning bite with little or no injection of venom is commonplace. However a dangerous snake always has the potential to inject sufficient venom to cause life-threatening symptoms each time it bites. The situation becomes critical where the snake has become enraged by severe provocation or if it delivers multiple bites.

First aid for snakebite:

- € Keep the patient still and reassure him/her.
- € Maintain vital functions, if imperilled.
- € Immediately apply a pressure immobilisation bandage (described in detail earlier).
- € Try and maintain the patient as still as possible and bring transport to them.
- € Always seek medical help at the earliest opportunity.
- € If the snake has been killed, bring it with the patient but do not waste time by trying to kill it.
- € Do not wash the wound.
- € 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.

Reducing the risks:

The best way to avoid being bitten is simply to leave snakes alone, particularly if the snake poses no threat to begin with. In addition:

- € Know appropriate first aid.
- € Wear appropriate clothing and boots in high risk areas.
- € Do not interfere with a snake if pets or other people have already provoked it.

- € Do not handle injured snakes.
- € Be aware of where you are placing your feet.
- € Do not put hands or feet in or under logs, rocks, tin or hollows or crevices without prior inspection.
- € Keep homes and workplaces clean and tidy.
- € Place stacks of tin, timber or similar materials on pallets or supports so that the bottom of stacks are not flush with the ground.
- € Keep homes and workplaces free of potential food or shelter for rodents.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION on rural workplace health and safety, please ring: 1300 369 915. Web address: www.whs.qld.gov.au (click on Industry, then Rural).

Workplace Health and Safety, DIR

Nambour	5470 8863
Maryborough	4121 1915
Toowoomba	4687 2821
Emerald	4983 7496

Farmsafe Queensland 1800 818 006

Townsville	4774 0522
Rockhampton	4933 1332
Malanda	4096 5386