

Australia has its fair share of critters and our international reputation is fuelled with terrifying tales of deadly creatures. Although none of us should be complacent, we're here to offer up a little perspective.

The title of this article, let alone the content, makes us shudder. However, it's an irrational fear; there are rarely any deaths by snakes in Australia. According to official records too, it's been over forty years since anyone in Australia died from a spider bite!

It's vital for any camper or hiker to know what to do if a snake or spider bites you – and even more so, what to do to avoid that situation in the first place.



It's vital for any camper or hiker to know what to do if a snake or spider bites you. Image: Exped

Snake Survival

Knowing a little bit about snake behaviour and adopting these easy tips could not only save your life but also help you camp with more confidence.

1. Wear Appropriate Clothing

Nearly all snake bites occur on the ankles, hands, and lower parts of the legs so covering these areas will significantly reduce the possibility of snake venom entering your bloodstream.

You might think you need to wear metal armour to prevent a snake from injecting venom, but most venomous snakes in Australia have relatively short fangs and tend to wipe venom into the wound rather than inject it deep into the skin. A good pair of gaiters or jeans will further help to prevent an Australian snake from penetrating the skin.

It goes without saying that you should wear closed footwear. Not only will this protect your feet, but create more vibrations than sandals or thongs. Vibrations help to scare snakes away before you reach them.

2. Carry First-Aid

Whether you're going for a short hike or a long camping trip, it's a good idea to be prepared for the possibility of a snake bite. Your first-aid kit should contain compression immobilisation bandages. In fact, heavy crepe bandages are ideal.



Closed shoes and gaiters are a must when heading into snake territory. Image: Keen

3. Carry Some Form of Communication

If you're in an area with no mobile reception, try to source another form of communication – or at least let someone, such as a Park Ranger, know your movements. A PLB is an important piece of kit to carry if you're heading to remote areas.

If bitten, one of the crucial things is to keep the injured limb immobilised. You'll need to stay still, then use a PLB to call for help.

4. Be Vigilant When Hiking

Snakes are incredibly shy creatures. Most will feel your foot vibrations and get out of the way before you even see them. There are exceptions though – when snakes are just warming up, they can be slower to react to your presence. If taken by surprise, they can strike without warning.

The main tip for hiking is to watch where you're walking. When hiking over logs and rocks,



it's a good idea to step on the log and then over it to ensure you can first see the other side. Some snakes may also hide in nooks of rock faces, or sun themselves on rock ledge. Always make sure you can see where you're putting your hands, or wear gloves and a long sleeve shirt if you're climbing a rocky path.

Of course, watching where you walk is easier said than done. When you're bushwalking, you're usually looking at your surroundings, not where you're putting your feet – which is why it's important to carry first-aid equipment and wear proper protection.



Keeping your site clean is hugely important to prevent snakes from hiding in and under your gear. Image: Coleman

5. Keep Your Campsite Clean

Snakes love mice. Leaving rubbish around the camping ground can attract rodents and, by extension, snakes. There are many reasons to keep your campsite clean – but if you ever needed an additional incentive, this is it! Snakes also like to hide under things, so keep picnic rugs and other items off the ground when you're away from the campsite.

6. Check Your Sleeping Bags & Boots

As snakes see humans as a threat, it's incredibly unlikely that one will enter a campsite while you're there. That said, they could curl up in warm places like sleeping bags if left out in the open while you're away. It's always a good idea to keep sleeping bags closed in your tent or the back of the car while you're out hiking. If you forget, shaking them out is good practice... just to ensure you don't cuddle up with any unwanted visitors at night!

The same goes for shoes. Boots are a bit like hollow logs, and even a metre long snake could hide inside one. If you're paranoid (like me), stuff socks in your boots at night and shake them out in the morning.

7. Be Careful When Collecting Firewood

If you have permission to collect firewood, it's a good idea to wear a long-sleeved shirt and gloves.

If collecting wood at night, I always carry a torch or wear a headlamp to ensure I can see where I'm putting my hands... and that the stick I'm picking up is indeed a stick!



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Treat All Snakes With Caution

Even if they're tiny, treat all snakes as potentially dangerous. Baby snakes are just as dangerous as adults – if not more so. This is partly because they're more difficult to spot, but tend to be more skittish and unpredictable too.

Even dead snakes should be considered dangerous. Snakes can still have biting reflexes, and venom can remain on the fangs long after death.

Steps to Take When Encountering a Snake

1. Stay calm, back away, and wait for it to move. Snakes will only strike humans when they feel threatened.
2. Don't provoke it or make any sudden movements they could perceive as a threat.
3. Never try to kill a snake. Like all native animals, they're protected – but the majority of bites occur when people try to kill them.
4. If the snake doesn't move, don't poke it with a stick or shovel. Many snakes can strike quickly from a distance.
5. While foot-stamping might encourage a snake to move off a track, only do this if you are a far distance from it (i.e. at least several metres). It can still be seen as a threatening action, especially if the snake is cornered.

Heads up! Ben and Lauren also discuss how to handle creepy crawlies at the campsite in Episode 31 of the Snowys Camping Show:

Treating a Snake Bite

1. Treat all suspected snakebites as life-threatening.
2. In Australia, bites might just look like a superficial scratch and not the two puncture wounds you might expect.
3. Apply a pressure immobilisation bandage to the limb immediately, splint the limb, and call an ambulance.
4. Even in a remote location, you should keep the limb immobilised, and stay calm and still.
5. The bandage should be applied to the whole length of the limb, and be as tight as you would strap a sprained ankle.
6. Never wash or cut the wound, as the hospital uses any venom on the skin to identify the snake.
7. Don't suck out the venom, and don't apply a tourniquet instead of an immobilisation bandage.

For more specific information, first-aid courses are a good idea.

Managing Your Fear of Snakes

It might be reassuring to know that even though Australians love the outdoors and their country is infamous for its venomous snakes – there are far fewer deaths in Australia than there are in America, India, Africa, and many other countries.

It's rare for Australian snakes to strike. It's even more uncommon for the fangs to penetrate clothing and the skin. When they do, most snakes don't actually inject any venom – and if they do, it's in such small volumes that antivenom isn't needed.

Bites from redbacks are far more common than those from funnel-web spiders.

Spider Safety

There are an estimated 10,000 species of spiders across Australia. Six of which are deemed to be dangerous, but only two have lethal venom that can be life-threatening to young children, the elderly, people of ill-health, and your beloved pooch. Unsurprisingly, these two are the funnel-web spider and the redback spider.

Bites from redbacks are far more common than those from funnel-web spiders but this is likely due to their preference to inhabit more populated areas. It is only the female redback whose venom is toxic to humans, and antivenom was introduced in 1956 with a funnel-web antivenom following more than 20-years later in 1980. Both antivenoms are very effective and, in most instances, bites are now successfully treated.

Being able to identify a type of spider and having some understanding of how they behave is worthwhile knowledge. Adopting basic preventative measures will lessen your risk of being bitten, but recognising the signs, symptoms, and knowing how to treat a bite is essential for all adventurers.

Prevention

Keeping your gear maintained and stored well will help to detract these eight-legged arachnids from settling in areas regularly interrupted by you.

Be extra vigilant during the warmer months when spiders are most active. Awareness is key and understanding where spiders are most likely to hang out is the best way to leave them alone and prevent getting bitten.

Spider Hotspots:

- Funnel-webs prefer to be close to the ground and burrow under logs and rocks where it is cool and moist.
- Redback spider webs are created by the female and can be recognised by the dense matrix of threads with channels leading downwards from the surface. They are found in dry, dark and sheltered spaces.
- **Home** – letterboxes, discarded toys that have been left outside, the folds of a camping chair, the exterior corners of a caravan or camper trailer that's been stored for a while, inside helmets, work gloves, tools, etc.
- **Camping** – old tin cans, sheets of corrugated iron, farm machinery, old tyres, fences and gates, bush amenities like long-drop toilets and donkey shower setups, etc.

Old sheds and forgotten tools are hotspots for spiders. Image: Franz W



How to Avoid a Bite:

Do:

- Keep your campsite clean and tidy
- Chat with your kids about spiders (and snakes) – show them pictures of what to look out for
- Check your gear – give it a shake before putting it on or packing it away
- Care for your gear, store it properly, and use lidded tubs
- Keep your tent or swag zipped up
- Wear shoes
- Keep an eye on your dog and check their bedding regularly

Don't:

- Leave your work or hiking boots on the ground outside your tent or swag, especially overnight
- Manage firewood without gloves
- Never put your hands and feet where you can't see
- Flick a spider with your hand

Encountering a Spider - and Managing it!

- Take a deep breath!
- Stay calm and assess the situation – reacting recklessly through fear will likely end with you being bitten.
- If the spider is on an easily transportable bit of kit i.e. your jacket, chair, table, or bag, place it on the ground away from where you are. If the spider doesn't crawl off and away of its own accord, you can gently encourage it to do so with a fallen branch, stick or roll of newspaper. If the spider becomes aggressive and rises ready to attack, walk away and leave it alone! You can go back and check on it later as it will probably crawl away on its own. Look over your item carefully before picking it back up.
- If the spider is inside your tent or on your vehicle, a dustpan and broom work well to brush the spider away, or carefully trap it for long enough that you can move outside and flick it off into a bush.

I know your first instinct may be to kill, kill, kill but remember... funnel-web spiders can become aggressive if/when they feel threatened. Redbacks too, but to a lesser degree.



Common spider bite symptoms include itchiness, redness, and mild swelling.



Signs & Symptoms of a Spider Bite

It is not a spider's intention to 'take on' a human! They are far more scared of us than we are of them. But when they sense a threat, they react with the universal survival response – attack or defend! For spiders like the redback or funnel-web, they defend themselves in the same way they attack their prey – by injecting venom to paralyse/immobilise.

Spider venom is a concoction of many different chemicals and broadly speaking, these are grouped into two main categories:

- *Necrotic* – this is the type of venom that affects the cells and skin tissue around the bite. Reactions vary from the skin becoming topically inflamed, to blisters and/or abnormal growths on the skin's surface. There's a popular myth surrounding the white-tailed spider whose venom is necrotic. Despite the fear and stories, there is no evidence that the bite from a white-tail creates a 'flesh eating' reaction. Instead, you are more likely to experience some redness and a mild burning sensation, followed by itching.
- *Neurotoxic* – this venom is fast-acting and attacks the nervous system. Funnel-webs and redbacks both possess this type of venom and in extreme cases, it can lead to respiratory issues or cardiac arrest.

Common Symptoms:

- Pain – mild burning sensation or a pulsating ache with swelling
- Itchiness
- Redness
- Mild swelling

More Severe Symptoms:

- Profuse sweating
- Severe escalating pain that emanates and progresses from the bite site
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- Muscular weakness
- Fever
- Headaches
- Abdominal or chest pain
- Increased blood pressure

Particularly Acute Cases:

- Loss of consciousness
- Seizures
- Respiratory failure



If you're bitten by a funnel-web spider, apply a compression bandage over the area of the



bite.

Treating a Spider Bite

For most spider bites, treatment is straightforward. However, for spiders that inject highly toxic venom which acts rapidly, it's essential to respond immediately with the right treatment.

Basic First Aid:

- Stay calm and reassure the person who has been bitten whilst also making them comfortable.
- Spiders can bite repeatedly so make sure there is no further danger or threat.
- Try and identify the spider – take a photo or capture it inside an empty jar using the technique described [here](#).
- Seek medical assistance especially for babies, young kids, the elderly, anyone with existing health issues or for those showing severe/acute symptoms.

Funnel-Web Spider Bite:

You want to slow down the movement of venom through the lymphatic system by doing what is known as the pressure immobilisation technique. This treatment is the same for [mouse spiders](#).

- Apply a [compression bandage](#) over the area of the bite.
- Use a second bandage to wrap from the lower limb upwards – you're aiming to cover as much of the entire limb as you can, and to wrap as tightly as possible without restricting blood flow.
- Apply a splint to the leg or arm – you may need a third bandage to secure the splint or whatever you can find.
- Keep the patient comfortable, calm and rested.
- Monitor them closely and watch for signs of deterioration or disorientation.
- Call, [radio](#), or send an alert for emergency assistance – [PLBs](#) or [Satellite Messenger](#) devices can save your life when you are remote and without a mobile signal.

It's recommended by [St John](#) that you do not apply pressure if the bite is on a person's head or torso. Their First Aid Fact Sheet for Spider Bites can be found [here](#) and may be worth printing off and stashing inside your kit.



The redback and funnel-web spider defend themselves by injecting venom to paralyse or immobilise.

Redback Spider Bite:

Redback spider bites are treated in the same way as most other spider bites and differ from the treatment for funnel-web bites.

- *Do not* use a compression bandage or immobilisation techniques.
- Apply ice or an [icepack](#) to the bite area – no longer than 20 minutes.



- Monitor them closely and watch for signs of deterioration or disorientation.
- Keep the patient comfortable, calm and rested.
- Call, [radio](#), or send an alert for emergency assistance – [PLBs](#) or [Satellite Messenger](#) devices can save your life when you are remote and without a mobile signal.

FYI:

Let's get a couple of things straight.

- Vinegar is an effective treatment for jellyfish stings but not for spider bites.
- Do not wash the wound/bite area – if there is any venom residue on the skin's surface this can be used by medical professionals to determine the type and appropriate treatment.
- Some say vodka is effective on spider bites however this is not recognised as an official treatment and professional first aid advice should always be followed.



Always carry a first-aid kit. Image: Exped

Whenever you're camping, hiking, touring or road tripping, it's always smart to carry a [first-aid kit](#). Some, like [Mediq](#), include components for different situations so in the event of a spider bite you can just grab the [Snake/Spider Module](#) and have basic first aid on hand.

The majority of spiders are harmless to humans so when you come across a spider, your best response is to give them space and leave them alone. According to the [Australian Museum](#), there are approximately 2000 people bitten by redbacks per year in Australia, and 30-40 people suffer from funnel-web spider bites. These have all been successfully treated since the introduction of antivenoms.

In Summary

If you wear the right clothing, go prepared, and stay vigilant, it's unlikely you will ever find yourself in a situation where you won't confidently enjoy your holiday.

In regards to snakes – simply be prepared. Ensure you have both a [snake bite](#) and [first-aid kit](#) on you at all times. You might even come to love our slithering friends. After all, they really are beautiful creatures – and crucial to the Australian bushland.

Spiders are also beautiful and an essential part of the ecosystem. Let's respect them and use our knowledge to act during the warmer months to come. Brush up on your first-aid knowledge and in any emergency situation, remember DRS ABCD – Danger, Response, Send for help, Airway, Breathing, CPR, Defibrillation.



Wear the right clothing, go prepared, and stay vigilant. Image: Keen

This article should be used only as a guide. If you do get bitten by a spider or snake, please seek professional medical advice. Special thanks to the [Australian Museum](#) and [St John Ambulance Australia](#) for their comprehensive online resources when researching this article.