

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, I'm here to offer up a little perspective.

According to official records, it's been over forty years since anyone in Australia died from a spider bite!

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.



The redback spider injects a neurotoxic venom. Image: Shutterstock

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 being bitten:

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

How to manage a spider if you find one:

- 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.



Funnel-web spiders can be aggressive and move very quickly. Image: Shutterstock



Signs & symptoms of a spider bite

It is not a spider's intention to 'take on' a human! They are way 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



Symptoms of a spider bite range from slight pain with swelling and redness, to severe



escalating pain and worse. Image: Inna Kozhina

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.

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.



You should use a compression bandage for a funnel-web spider bite and also a mouse spider. Image: Alpa Prod

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.



Always carry a first aid kit with you when camping or hiking. Image: PressLab

Spiders are beautiful and are 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.

This article should be used only as a guide. If you do get bitten, 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.

Have you ever been bitten by a spider?