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The Five Main Rules for Avoiding Snake Bite

The following information has been provided as a guide only.

Spring has sprung and snakes are on the move.

In Australia there are over 80 species of venomous snake. Fortunately, only about 20 of them are considered dangerous to humans. Unfortunately, some of these dangerously venomous snakes are quite common and quite likely to be encountered by bushwalkers. Snakes tend to hibernate in winter and they become most mobile during spring and early summer, as they come out of hibernation in search of food and suitable mates. This is the time that they are most active and most dangerous.

When a snake bites a human, they normally aren't doing it to eat the person, only to defend themselves from what they perceive as a threat. As a result, most are more likely to "strike" rather than "bite". These strikes are, in the simplest terms, the snake hitting with its fangs. Consequently, these strikes are often shallow, and usually will not penetrate certain types of clothing. Also, the striking distance of a snake is only half its body length. So a 3 metre snake will have a 1.5 metre strike range. You actually have to be pretty close for a snake to harm you. Snakes also can't strike particularly high up (with the exception of the Western Taipan, as it is such a huge snake it has a much greater strike distance, and thus can strike higher as well) and so most commonly strike below the knee on an adult.

The stories about people getting chased by snakes are just mistaken. A snake, when it feels threatened, will try to go to a safe place. If you happen to be between the snake and its safe place, it will try to get past you to get there. If you happen to turn and run in the same direction, the snake will appear to chase you. Also, a snake's attention span is less than a minute long. If you disturb a snake and then let it be, a minute later it will forget about you and go about doing what snakes do - which is not a lot, other than look for food, shelter, and a suitable mate.

The first step to avoiding an encounter with a snake is to wear appropriate clothing, footwear and by following a few simple rules will help avoid disaster.

Rule 1: Tough clothing and boots when in snake territory.

Thick, tough, close-knit pants, thick socks, and good boots will provide a good defence against a snake when walking in the bush. It may not be totally bite proof from all snakes, but it's far more effective than shorts and thongs! My favourite attire is knee high gaiters when walking off track or when encountering long grass.



Rule 2: Keep your hands to yourself.

Whether you are in the bush or your own back yard, putting your hands into any kind of hole or hollow log can be disastrous if a snake happens to be inside. Many people have made the mistake of picking up what they thought was a stick or a length of rope to find they were suddenly holding a dangerous snake. Many people that have been bitten have been silly enough to try and antagonise or kill a snake. Watch where you put your hands and leave snakes alone, and they usually won't hurt you.

Rule 3: Stop. Don't move.

If you suddenly find yourself in a situation where you are confronted by a snake, simply stop and don't move. The snake will, after a minute, forget you are even there and will usually just go about doing its own personal snake business. If it is moving towards you, it will not attack you if you stand still. It might slither over your feet, even curl around your leg, but so long as you remain motionless it will not strike. You can yell and scream for help as much as you like, just don't move! Even if the snake has bitten you, the best thing to do is remain perfectly still and let the snake leave. Two bites are worse than one, and when bitten by a snake, movement will actually speed up the venom travelling through your system. Staying perfectly still is the best thing.

Rule 4: Watch the snake.

Take a good look at what the snake is doing and where it is going. Is it slithering away and if so, in what direction? You want to make sure you leave the scene in the opposite direction to the snake if you can. Is it now far enough away that you are out of its strike range and can safely move away, or has it decided to stay still as well? Most snakes when startled will move away.

Rule 5: Move away very slowly.

In some situations, after you have stood still for that seeming endless minute, you may have to move away from the snake even if you are still in its strike range. Rapid movements may startle the snake further, and there is one species that breaks the rules about leaving the scene. The Death Adder is an ambush snake that will sit perfectly still for days waiting for its prey to wander past, so it will not move away from you, you have to move away from it. Snakes sense vibration and as their prey is usually fast moving they are very aware of the vibrations created by rapid movement. If you move very slowly, and place your feet on the ground with each step very gently, you will create less rapid vibrations and thus won't attract the attention of the snake enough for it to want to bite or strike.

