

SOUTH COAST VET CARE ~ TALKING ANIMALS

SNAKE BITE

As we enter the warmer months, snakes emerge from hibernation and can be encountered by hapless pets. On the **Fleurieu Peninsula** the snake population consists mainly of brown snakes (90%) with about 9% red bellied black snakes, particularly around Goolwa, Currency Creek, Inman Valley and cow country. There are a few tiger snakes in marshy areas, especially around the mouth of the River Murray and on Hindmarsh Island. The pygmy copper head is also present.

The venoms of these snakes differ, as do their biting behaviour. This influences the amount of venom they tend to inject. Brown snake venom has little destructive action on tissue, but destroys some clotting components of the blood. It is very neurotoxic, causing nerve malfunction. This snake has a small head and therefore often has trouble injecting much venom, but the venom is very powerful. It gets into the lymphatic system and takes longer to spread than some other venoms. The red bellied black snake venom mainly destroys tissue and red blood cells, causing a very painful bite wound. The tiger snake venom is less neurotoxic per unit than the brown snake venom, but as the tiger snake has a greater biting capacity than the brown, more venom is injected. The tiger snake is therefore the most dangerous of these snakes. Due to the amount of venom, there is an early onset of symptoms. The pygmy copperhead is a little snake, and causes similar signs to the tiger snake, being neurotoxic, but not specifically damaging to tissue or clotting factors.

Some of the signs you are likely to see with snake bite in dogs and cats are **staggering, dilated pupils, and drooling**. Cats often survive longer than dogs, and may be found recumbent and unable to walk or lift their heads. Dogs may be heard yelping in excitement as they find a snake, or when bitten. Urgent veterinary attention is required – generally within 20-30 minutes.

Treatment is by administration of antivenin and supportive antibiotics, with intravenous fluids to flush the toxins through the kidneys and out of the body. It is possible for the animals to have an allergic reaction to the antivenin, and so this treatment is preceded by cortisone and antihistamine to reduce such as risk. There are also some reports of the use of Vitamin C to counteract the toxins, but these are as yet unsupported by scientific research. If the type of snake is unknown, brown snake antivenin may be used as the most likely antidote. This would have no effect if the animals were bitten by a black snake, in which case symptoms of envenomation would continue. A tiger/brown snake antivenin is available to treat tiger snake bites and also has some action against black snake venom.

Treatment for snake bite can be expensive due to the price of antivenin, followed by intensive care in hospital, often requiring nursing and special attention for several days. Animals that have been treated for snake bite and have recovered should be kept quiet for the following month because of the enormous stress this puts on their body.

If you are in an area where there is a high risk of snake bit, it is worth confining pets either indoors or in a snake-proof run made with fine bird netting. When walking dogs in the summer time, ensure they are on a lead and not running into bushes where you cannot see what they are doing. If aviary birds are kept, ensure that the cages are cleaned regularly to discourage mice, which then attract snakes.