



MEDIA RELEASE

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Creepy crawlies that put the sting in summer

Whether they crawl, fly, swim or slither, a bite or sting from an insect or animal can leave you with more than an itch.

While many bites and stings are harmless, some can be debilitating and even life-threatening.

South Western Sydney Area Health Service public health physician Dr Leon Heron said in Australians get used to insects, bugs and animals being around all the time. In summer, when the weather is warmer and Australians enjoy more regular outdoor activity, they sometimes forget nature can be dangerous.

Whether it's a barbecue in the backyard, a quick dip at the beach or a relaxed walk in the bush, Dr Heron advises to keep an eye out for ticks, mosquitoes, snakes and spiders, bluebottles and the blue-ringed octopus.

"It's particularly important to keep an eye on children playing outside or at the beach. Their natural curiosity for nature makes them more likely to approach and touch an animal or insect.

"If an adult or child does get bitten or stung, it's important to understand appropriate first aid and if you think it might be necessary, don't delay a call for help," he said.

Ticks

Dr Heron advises us to be on the lookout for ticks when out in the bush and in the garden.

"Ticks like humid, moist bushy areas, so it's important to keep lawns mowed around your house. It's also a good idea to check clothing and pets for ticks when coming indoors.

"Ticks inject a toxin that can cause local irritation or a mild allergic reaction, however most tick bites cause little or no symptoms.

"In some cases ticks can pose a serious threat to a person's health," Dr Heron said.

“Symptoms to be aware of include rashes, headache, flu-like symptoms, intolerance to light, weakness in limbs and partial facial paralysis,” he said.

Mild allergic reactions and itching can be treated with an anti-itching lotion. If swelling of the face or throat causes breathing difficulties, seek urgent medical attention.

“It’s important to remove a tick as soon as possible after locating it. Use fine-pointed tweezers and grasp the tick as close to the skin as possible. Gently pull the tick straight out with steady pressure. If you have difficulty, seek medical attention.

“Do not try to kill the tick with methylated spirits or other chemicals. This only causes the tick to inject more toxins,” Dr Heron said.

There are many species of tick in Australia. The most common tick to bite humans is found in NSW along the state’s eastern coastal strip and inland for 30 km.

Mosquitoes

It’s an unfortunate coincidence that summer time, when we spend more time outdoors, is also a time for mosquitoes.

According to Dr Heron, mosquitoes can be a problem in any area where there’s water.

“Natural mosquito breeding sites include coastal estuaries, areas near rivers, dams and lakes and other areas around the home such as ground pools and containers filled with water,” he said.

Dr Heron advised most bites are harmless, causing nothing more than a small lump and an irritating itch. However, some mosquitos can transfer unpleasant infections such as the Ross River Virus and the related Barmah Forest Virus.

“Symptoms for Ross River Virus and Barmah Forest Virus are similar. They include arthritis of small joints, tiredness, headaches, rash and fever. These diseases are not fatal, but can cause severe, persistent and debilitating symptoms,” he said.

These diseases can be contracted by anyone. Both are common, with over 1000 cases reported in some years, mainly from December through to May, though it’s likely many more cases go unreported.

“The best way to protect you and your family against these diseases is to avoid bites,” Dr Heron said.

Important preventive measures include:

- Protecting your skin from bites by covering up with long sleeves, pants and socks, and using insect repellents on any exposed skin. The best repellents contain the chemical ingredients DEET or picaridin
- Ensure there are no pools of water where mosquitoes can breed - ponds, undrained potplants, blocked gutters and old tyres
- Ensure all doors and windows are fitted with flyscreens
- When camping or on holidays, make sure your accommodation, including your tent, has flyscreening in good condition.

Snakes and Spiders

Understanding the correct first aid for a snake or spider bite can mean the difference between life and death.

“It’s vital a bite victim receives appropriate first aid immediately. This should be done as a priority before calling for expert help,” Dr Heron said.

First aid procedures for snake and spider bites include:

- Place a firm bandage to the limb commencing at the bite site, then going down to the fingers or toes and then up to the limb to the hip or shoulder. Use whatever material is available including clothing as bandages
- Keep the limb still
- Bring transport to the patient
- The patient should not attempt to walk or run
- Under no circumstances should the bandage be removed until the patient has reached hospital
- Call 000 once first aid has been administered.

Dr Heron said people living in bushfire danger areas need to be especially wary of snakes and spiders as, in the event of a fire, they may be frightened out of their natural habitat and into homes.

“Of course, prevention is better than cure. When it comes to avoiding a snake bite, the best advice is simply to leave the snake alone,” he said.

Dr Heron said in almost 80 per cent of cases seen in hospitals, people are bitten when they attempt to either catch or kill a snake.

Brown snakes and tiger snakes cause the majority of snake bites in Australia. The most dangerous spiders in NSW are the funnelweb spider, mouse spider and the redback, which can all cause serious illness and can be fatal.

Bluebottles and blue-ringed octopus

Australia has some of the world’s most beautiful beaches but it’s important not to forget the dangers that can await us.

Dr Heron said we should be on the lookout for bluebottles at the beach, whether in the water or on the sand.

“While bluebottle stings are generally not fatal, they can be extremely painful. If someone is stung, the best treatment is to clear the tentacles away with water and apply a cold pack or ice for 15 minutes.

“Victims should also seek professional medical treatment,” Dr Heron advised. He said people should also be aware of the blue-ringed octopus’s sting.

“It’s quite dangerous because the poison can cause paralysis, so recommended treatment in this instance is to take the patient straight to hospital.”

Issued by South Western Sydney Area Health Service Public Affairs, contact Maree Spry 9828 6848 for further information.