Snake Awareness for Dog Owners in Tasmania

Overview & Purpose

This guide helps dog owners in Tasmania reduce the risk of snake encounters, identify the three medically significant species (copperhead, white-lip, tiger snake), and respond effectively if a dog is bitten.

Implementing these practices helps protect both pets and humans and ensures rapid, informed first aid.

You'll learn:

- What a snake bite is and why it's dangerous
- The three Tasmanian snake species and how to identify them
- How Tasmanian snakes behave and when they are most active
- What a snakebite may look like
- All clinical signs and symptoms (including early collapse + "false recovery")
- What to do — and what not to do — if your dog is bitten
- The role of antivenom and what vets do on arrival
- How long snakebite effects take to appear
- How to protect your dog at home and on walks

What Is a Snake Bite?

A snake bite occurs when a snake strikes and its fangs pierce the skin, injecting venom from specialised glands into the bloodstream.

When bitten, the venom rapidly enters the lymphatic system and begins attacking the **nervous system** (causing paralysis), **muscles** (causing tremors, collapse, respiratory failure, **blood-clotting ability** (leading to internal bleeding).

Initial symptoms can include pain and swelling around the bite site, followed by more serious systemic symptoms like:

- **Respiratory** - Breathing difficulty, swallowing difficulty
- **Neurological** - Muscle weakness, paralysis
- **Gastrointestinal** - Nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain
- **Severe Conditions** - Collapse, unconsciousness, death

The progression of symptoms varies depending on the amount of venom injected, the victim's size and health, and the time of medical intervention.

All Tasmanian snakes are venomous.

Sometimes they may deliver a "dry bite" — a defensive strike with no venom injected — but it is impossible to know this at the time, so **every snake bite must be treated as an emergency**.

Venom vs Poison:
The difference lies in how the toxin enters the body.

- **Venom** is *injected* into another animal through fangs or a sting — as with snakes.
- **Poison** is *absorbed or ingested* by eating, inhaling, or touching the animal — as with a poison dart frog.
  An easy way to remember is:

  If it bites you and you get sick, it's venomous.
  If you bite it and get sick, it's poisonous.

All Tasmanian snakes have relatively small fangs, designed to efficiently inject venom into small prey such as frogs and rodents.

Young snakes, while just as venomous as adults, have smaller fangs and are less capable of controlling the amount of venom they deliver. Although their bite may not penetrate as deeply, any snakebite — from juvenile or adult — must be treated as potentially venomous and life-threatening.

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Tasmanian Snake Species

Tasmania has **three native venomous snakes**, all **protected under law** — it's illegal to harm or kill them.

Species	Description	Venom	Venom Effects
Lowland Copperhead	Olive to dark brown with V-shaped head markings. Up to 1.7m length	Post- and pre-synaptic neurotoxins, also contain myotoxins and haemotoxins	Severe neurotoxic effects, including paralysis, and may also affect muscle and blood tissue. Coma & cardiac arrest
White-lip Snake	Slim body, dark olive green to a green-grey on the back with a pale grey under-surface. Up to 40cm length	Mildly neurotoxic; poses little threat to humans, though can be serious for dogs	Localized pain and swelling
Tiger Snake	Bold bands of brown, green or black, or solid dark green or black. Up to 2m length	pre-synaptic and post-synaptic neurotoxins, myotoxins and procoagulants	paralysis, incoagulable blood and muscle damage, which may lead to renal failure

**All Tasmanian snakes are live bearers (they don't lay eggs) and generally avoid human contact.*

Snake Behaviour

Snakes are quiet, reclusive creatures that prefer to move away rather than engage.
They play a vital role in Tasmania's ecosystems by controlling rats, mice, and frogs.

Their activity level depends heavily on the weather — on hot days snakes are much more lively and alert, while on cool or cold days they move slowly and can appear sluggish or lethargic.

Tasmanian snakes are more active from November to May (weather dependent), and will often be coiled up sleeping (brumation) from May to October, although on a warm sunny day in the winter they can still venture out.

To avoid surprising a snake, make a little noise as you walk your dog, your footsteps or talking give snakes time to sense vibration and slither away before you approach.

- Walk dogs on established paths, staying close to tracks and away from undergrowth.
- Keep dogs on lead in bushland and near waterways.

If you do come across one:

- Stay still and calm.
- Give the snake plenty of space to move away — at least five metres.
- Never try to frighten, move, or capture it.

Tasmanian snakes are not confrontational by nature. They have a strong flight-or-fight response and will almost always choose to escape.
However, if they feel trapped or cornered, they may defend themselves, so the best approach is always distance, calm, and time to retreat.

Snake Bites in Dogs

- Snakebite wounds can be difficult to identify — the wound is often hidden beneath fur and may lack swelling, blood or redness. Fangs are small, leaving tiny punctures that may look like scratches.
- Dogs may appear normal after a bite but can still receive a lethal venom dose.
- Delays in treatment lower survival chances.
- Venom interferes with blood clotting and damages organs and muscles.
- Dogs' natural curiosity and hunting instincts put them at risk.
- One anti venom treats all snake bites in Tasmania - no need to record the type of snake
- Not all vets stock antivenom — always call ahead.

If you suspect a bite, **treat it as an emergency** even if there's no visible wound.

Signs and Symptoms of Snakebite

If your dog shows **any of these symptoms**, seek **emergency vet treatment immediately.**

- Sudden **collapse**, then apparent recovery
- **Lethargy or weakness**
- **Muscle tremors**, shaking, or reduced eye-blinking
- **Dilated pupils**
- **Unsteady movement (ataxia)**
- **Paralysis**, often beginning in hind legs
- **Loss of bladder or bowel control**
- **Vomiting or drooling**
- **Irregular bleeding** from nose, mouth, or bite site
- **Dark or bloody urine**
- **Rapid or laboured breathing**

Immediate collapse followed by seeming recovery can indicate a snake bite — get to a vet at once.

Signs of snake bite usually appear half an hour to 24 hours after an animal is bitten. Dogs typically show signs quicker than cats.

If your dog plays with or chases a snake, or collapses then appears fine, call your vet right away and check that they stock antivenom.

Immediate First Aid

1. **Stay Calm & Keep Your Dog Calm**
    - Keep the dog as still as possible to slow venom spread.
2. **Call Your Vet**
    - Call ahead to the nearest veterinary hospital to alert them of a snakebite case (not all vets carry antivenom)
3. **Remove collars**
    - If the bite is on the face or neck (to allow for swelling).
4. **Apply Pressure Immobilisation Bandage (PIB) (if bitten on limb)**
    - Wrap a broad, firm bandage over the bite site, then extend it up the limb.
    - Mark the bite sight on the bandage in marker pen.

    - Splint the limb straight to minimise movement.
5. **Transport Immediately**
    - Load the dog into a vehicle with minimal handling. Do not let your dog walk to the car.
    - Try and keep the site of the bite below the level of their heart.
6. **Do Not**
    - Try to photograph, catch or kill the snake.
    - Wash, cut, or suck the wound.
    - Apply ice or a tourniquet.
    - Excite or exercise your dog.

Veterinary Treatment

Time is Critical

The sooner treatment begins, the better the chance of survival.

Antivenom

- The same anti-venom is used for all three species of snake in Tasmania - no need to identify the snake.
- Neutralises circulating venom in the blood.
- Made from horse serum antibodies specific to snake toxins.
- Early administration is vital; it cannot reverse venom already bound to nerves.
- Multiple vials may be required; antivenom is expensive and perishable.

Supportive Care

Vets may provide:

- **IV fluids** to stabilise blood pressure
- **Oxygen therapy** or assisted ventilation
- **Pain relief and sedation**
- **Blood transfusions** if clotting is impaired
- **Blood and urine tests** to assess organ function

Recovery

With prompt treatment, around **80 % of dogs survive**.
Recovery usually takes **24–48 hours**, though severe cases may need longer care.

How Long Can It Take to Kill a Dog?

Timing depends on:

- Snake species and venom potency
- Amount of venom injected
- Bite location and dog size
- Time to treatment

Death most often results from respiratory paralysis and can occur within 1–24 hours.
Every minute counts — get to a vet immediately.

Snake-Aware Yard Care

- Keep grass short - mow regularly
- Remove rubble, piles of timber, rocks, or metal sheets from yards to reduce snake habitat.
- Secure compost heaps, chook pens and feed stores to deter rodents, which attract snakes.
- Remove pots or trays of water
- Invest in snake-proof fencing for your property.
- Remove food scraps from outside that may attract rats (and therefore snakes).
- If you suspect or know there is a snake, keep your dog away and get in touch with a snake catcher to have it removed. Do not try and move the snake yourself.

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Veterinary & Emergency Contacts

- **AES -** 1300 302 912, 37 Derwent Park Rd, Moonah TAS 7009
- **Local Veterinary Clinics:** Google to check for your local clinics
- Reptile Rescue Incorporated Tasmania 0499 116 690. Network of fully insured snake handlers

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