

14 January 26

When the bush bites back

Rural doctors urge not to ignore bites and stings

With summer underway and people enjoying the outdoors as much as possible, rural doctors are reminding people that not all encounters with the bush are harmless — and that even minor bites and stings should never be ignored.

Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) President Dr Sarah Chalmers said snake bites, insect stings and tick bites are more common during summer, particularly among people camping, hiking or spending extended time outdoors.

“In Australia, if it crawls, flies, swims or sits quietly minding its own business — it probably bites or stings,” Dr Chalmers said.

“While we like to joke about the things that bite and sting here, the risks are real — especially in rural and remote areas.



“Of course, there are the usual suspects: snakes (brown, tiger, taipan... pick your poison), spiders (redback, funnel-web), scorpions, ants (including very angry bull ants), wasps, bees, ticks... and add into that if you are at the beach: bluebottles, box jellyfish, stone fish... the list goes on.

“But even some of our land mammals can pack an unexpected punch.



“This week we saw reports of fruit bats/flying foxes suffering in the heat and falling onto the ground. While they can look cute and harmless, particularly if they are carrying a baby, they can be carrying very nasty diseases, and should not be handled directly.

“Fruit bats can carry Australian Bat Lyssavirus (ABLV), which is closely related to rabies and can be transmitted to humans through bites, scratches or saliva entering broken skin, your eyes or your mouth,” Dr Chalmers said.

“ABLV is rare but can be fatal if untreated so any bite or scratch from a bat is a medical emergency and requires urgent treatment, so don’t handle a fruit bat, alive or dead.”

For any bite, Dr Chalmers advises to seek medical advice if you experience increasing pain, swelling or redness at a bite or sting site, nausea, vomiting or headaches, dizziness, confusion or collapse, difficulty breathing, or signs of infection.

“Any suspected snake bite should be treated as a medical emergency,” Dr Chalmers said.

“And if symptoms don’t feel right — even after what seems like a minor bite or sting — it’s always safer to get checked early. And of course, the best way to avoid a nasty reaction is to try and avoid bites and stings in the first place.”

To stop your holiday from having a bite to it, rural doctors recommend:

- wear closed shoes and long pants
- use insect repellent
- check for ticks regularly and remove them safely
- shake out boots and sleeping bags
- use a torch at night
- avoid reaching into logs or long grass
- don’t touch dead or dying animals
- seek medical advice early if unsure.

“We all want our holidays to be memorable — just not for the wrong reasons,” Dr Chalmers said. “A little preparation can stop it ending with a nasty sting in the tail!”

Downloadable photo - [Dr Sarah Chalmers](#)

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State specific contacts are also available

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