

SNAKE BITE

Dr David Bartholomeusz

Senior Veterinarian at Veresdale Equine Veterinary Services (VEVS)

www.vevs.com.au

Snake bite in horses is often fatal because more often than not the horse is bitten on the face and because of this area's very high blood supply the horse tends to absorb a lot of poison and therefore tends to not do very well.

Secondly, by the time people notice something is wrong the damage is usually already done. As a consequence quite a large number of snake bitten horses that I have seen have died. I think that this is related to how long it takes for the reaction to occur before the owner realizes that the horse is sick.

Another problem is that of getting enough anti-venom of the correct type into a horse. There are several types of specific anti-venoms (Red Bellied Black snake, Brown snake, Tiger snake etc), and there is polyvalent anti-venom which is to multiple species and correspondingly expensive.

Generally speaking with anti-venoms, the time to get them in to the horse is before the horse displays major clinical signs. Once major clinical signs are seen the damage has already been done. By that time the anti-venom can stop any more damage, but the damage that has already been done may not be reversible. That kind of damage takes time to sort itself out and the question is whether the damage is so severe that it will get beyond the ability for the body of the horse to repair, and whether the horse's systems can be supported until the repair occurs.

The signs of snakebite are usually weakness and collapse. The weakness tends to be progressive. That is, it starts in the back and then works forward and gradually gets worse. The horse then tends to spend more time lying down. The symptoms then progress further to paralysis of the diaphragm and chest muscles and subsequently death.

Snakebite can cause extensive muscle damage which means a lot of myoglobin (which is the red part of the muscle) leaks out and gets into the bloodstream, runs around in the bloodstream and jams up the kidneys. Once the kidneys are clogged up with myoglobin, there isn't any easy way to unclog them and the horse can therefore die of kidney failure. Sometimes a horse can be got past the collapsed stage but then the horse still dies of kidney failure.

There is often also damage to the various homeostatic systems of the body such as the clotting mechanisms, so one symptom sometimes seen is bleeding, either from the nose or mouth, or into the mucous membranes such as the gums.

Another thing that often happens (and this happens in dogs particularly) is that the animal gets a bad bite from a snake and collapses within ½ an hour but then gets up again after a while and wanders around apparently fine for a couple of hours only to collapse again. It is during the second-time-collapse that the animal tends to die. We are not really sure what happens at times but, for example, I remember many, many years ago, getting called by a client who lived 5 minutes from the surgery and he said: "I have just seen my horse getting bitten by a big brown snake!" I jumped in the car and raced straight up there. It literally wouldn't have been more than 10 minutes before I got there and the horse was dead. It was bitten on the face. There was a big possibility that it was a King Brown snake, but that is an example of how fast it can happen.

Regardless of how big the horse is, it is a question of how much venom is injected. If you see your horse has been bitten by a snake, or suspect it has been bitten, **do exactly as you would do for a human**. Get your vet ASAP or sooner. The problem is 99.9% of the time you don't actually see it happen.

What you often find is a horse that is looking weak or has collapsed and you've got to deal with that. Could it be a snake bite? Could it have been kicked by another horse? Could it have an injury to its back? Is it a 'wobbler'? Has the horse got in to some other form of poison (have you sprayed any poisons around? have you been spraying insecticide?)? There are so many things it could be.

The most common snakebites are Browns; you get an occasional Tiger and occasional Red Bellied blacks. Red Bellied Black snakes don't usually cause death, but they can cause a lot of pain and muscle damage and some blood changes.

The snakes that definitely cause deaths are the various brown snakes, King Browns, Taipans and Death Adders: there are a few of these in some areas, and there are a few Tigers around creeks and other waterways.

The take-home message is : IF YOU EVER SEE YOUR HORSE GET BITTEN BY A SNAKE CALL THE VET STRAIGHT AWAY!

Keep the contact details of you vet in a handy place - a fridge magnet is great – then even other members of the family will be able to find it in an emergency.