

TOUCH AUSSIES

by Kerry Cue

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We Aussies are tough, but not in a wrestling-crocodiles-and-opening-beer-bottles-with-our-teeth kind of way. We are tough because every summer we leave our suburban bunkers and venture into the Great Outdoors.

We might not venture far – no further than, say, the cement block barbie in the backyard. But still we risk our lives as Australia boasts some of the most venomous and/or irritating biting beasts in the world. And many live in our own backyards. As if we Aussies didn't have enough worries already with our venomous snakes, spiders, fish, octopi and jellyfish, now we can add lizards to the list. Yes! Lizards. This year scientists at the Australian Venom Research Unit discovered many Aussie lizards have snake-like venom. It may not be enough to kill you. But a lizard bite could upset the rhythm of tossing the salad, for sure. So you need some up-dated First Aid advice.

You know about snakebite. The Red Cross recommends applying a pressure bandage, immobilising the limb and keeping the patient calm as you wait for the ambulance. I'm not sure how you keep a patient with a 2m Tiger snake hanging off their ankle, calm. Drop a Copperhead in the middle of a yoga class and see how Zen they remain. The good news is, however, you don't have to kill the snake (It's identified by its venom.), the patient (No more tourniquets strangling a mate's vital bits.) or yourself (No more sucking venom out of a mate's semi-rotten foot.)

Spider bites are, mostly, not fatal in Australia unless, of course, you are driving a car or you are the member of my family who needs capsicum spray sedation at the mere sight of a Daddy Long Legs. The Red Cross recommends serious Funnel-Web type spider bites get the snakebite treatment. Lesser bites just need a pack of frozen peas and optimism like 'Nah! It wasn't a Red-Back, mate. It was sort of... dunno!' Don't panic. Now we have the technology to ID arachnids.

This year UK pub worker, Matthew Stevens, 23, took a picture with his camera phone of the 13cm Brazilian Wandering Spider that bit him at work. Matthew collapsed and was taken to hospital. The hospital faxed the pic to the Bristol Zoo and the anti-venom was delivered. Matthew was released the

next day and the spider was held in detention as an illegal 8-legged immigrant. But can I offer two suggestions. If you do take a photo of the spider with your camera phone tell the victim it is for medical purposes, not just to message your mates. And secondly, cut back the Red Back Spiderman jokes. The victim won't be in the mood.

As for the buzzing biting beasties, the European wasp is the most aggressive and the average Aussie cannot defend themselves properly with a beer in one hand and a collapsing paper plate in the other. Wasps are attracted to sweet and fatty substances and you look like a large well-dressed donut to a wasp. Bees on the other hand are attracted to hairspray, bright colours and perfume so this Christmas sit some distance from your gaudily dressed aging aunt. Apart from severe allergic – Dial 000 - reactions, the Red Cross recommends carefully removing the bee stinger and treating both bee and wasp stings with an icepack. An Esky is really a First Aid kit. If a bee stings your 8 year old on the scalp, I've found, you must get them in a headlock to remove the stinger. Then for the rest of the day they show a severe allergic reaction to their mother.

Mozzie, Sandfly and ant bites are all acidic, so you can wash them with a weak solution of ammonia or carb soda. If bitten by all three, just trim your fingernails and try not to think about it. As for lizards, there isn't a lot of lizard-bite first aid information out there. My 1969 St John's Ambulance First Aide Manual insists lizards can be detached from one's appendages by applying 'a lighted match or cigarette to the mouth'. Collecting 12 cigarette burns while detaching one lizard seems dumb. I imagine simply jumping around like King Kong on speed would effectively detach a lizard. Then try the frozen peas.

So when you head into the Great Aussie Outdoors this summer avoid bright clothes, perfume and eating sweet or fatty foods. Use repellent. Watch out for creeping, crawling, wriggling things. Regularly inspect body crevices for ticks and mites. And try relax and enjoy yourself.