



News Release

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Snake bite victims urged to seek emergency hospital care

People bitten by snakes should go to hospital immediately for assessment and treatment, doctors have said.

Around 50 to 100 people are bitten by venomous adder snakes in the UK each year – mostly in summer – but many do not urgently seek medical care.

Fourteen people have been bitten and received hospital treatment for adder bites in the UK over the past month. Some of these patients arrived at hospital too late for treatment to be effective.

Delaying treatment following a bite puts them at higher risk of long term disability, researchers say.

Some adder bites do not inject venom and may not require treatment – though doctors say they should still be monitored for potential problems.

In some cases bites can cause patients to faint. They can also cause the tongue to swell up, which can lead to breathing problems.

Patients who experience symptoms should get urgent treatment with antivenoms, which are held by most emergency departments in the UK, doctors say.

The most common consequences of poisonous adder bites are swelling and bruising, which can extend from the hand to the chest wall or from the foot to the groin. This can be made worse by having to walk back to a road to reach transport.

Antivenom for adder bites can substantially reduce the severity of swelling if given early. Delaying treatment, however, can lead to intense swelling and pain of the bitten limb and mobility problems that require long-term physiotherapy.

Adders are the only species of poisonous snake found on our shores. Bites are more common in the summer months, when snakes are more active and people are outside enjoying the countryside.

Adders can be identified by their distinctive zig-zag markings along the body and a dark-coloured V-shape on the head.

The majority of incidents occur when the snakes are accidentally disturbed or deliberately antagonised.

Michael Eddleston, Professor of Clinical Toxicology at the University of Edinburgh and Consultant Physician for the National Poisons Information Service, said: “We’re seeing an increase in people who have been bitten coming to hospital after 24 hours or so, when their swelling is already quite severe. This puts them at risk of painful mobility problems.

“Treatment is much more effective if given early and we would urge victims to get to hospital as quickly as possible. Not all will require antivenom but those who do will get it quickly, limiting the extent of the swelling and the long-term complications.

“If at all possible, people should not walk long distances after the bite but use friends and mobile phones to seek help.”

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