

Advice Sheet - Animal-Associated Hazards

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Categories: Health and Medical

The world's most dangerous animal is the mosquito. Mosquito-transmitted diseases are responsible for the deaths of one in 17 people. Insect repellents, protective clothing, and mosquito netting are advisable in many parts of the world. While most insect bites cause nuisance side effects (itching, stinging), medical attention should be sought if a bite causes redness, swelling, bruising, or persistent pain.

Wild animal attacks on tourists are rare, as most wild animals prefer to avoid human contact. Problems do occur, however, when travelers provoke, threaten, or attempt to feed them. Always heed posted signs and warnings concerning animal contact. Treat foreign domestic house pets with caution; many foreign countries have less rigorous animal vaccination programs; rabies may therefore be endemic. Although dogs are the main reservoir of rabies in many developing countries, foxes, bats, mongooses, skunks, wolves, jackals, raccoons, and cats also carry and spread the disease. Rabies exists worldwide; highly endemic areas include parts of Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Peru, Colombia, Ecuador, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam. If bitten, wash any bite or scratch immediately with soap and water, and seek medical assistance.

Venomous snakes are hazards in many parts of the world, though deaths from snakebites are relatively rare. The Australian brown snake, Russell's viper and cobras in southern Asia, carpet vipers in the Middle East, and coral and rattlesnakes in the Americas are particularly dangerous. Most snakebites are the direct result of handling or harassing snakes, which bite as a defensive reaction. Attempts to kill snakes are dangerous, often leading to bites on the fingers. The venom of a small or immature snake may be even more concentrated than that of a larger one.

Fewer than half of all snakebite wounds actually contain venom, but medical attention should be sought any time a bite wound breaks the skin. A pressure bandage, ice (if available), and immobilization of the affected limb are recommended while the victim is moved as quickly as possible to a medical facility. Specific therapy for snakebites is controversial, and should be left to the judgment of local emergency medical personnel. Snakes tend to be active at night and in warm weather. Boots and long pants should be worn when walking outdoors at night in snake-infested regions.

Bites from scorpions may be painful but are seldom dangerous, except possibly in infants. Exposure to bites can be avoided by sleeping under mosquito nets and by shaking clothing and shoes before putting them on, particularly in the morning. Snakes and scorpions tend to rest in shoes and clothing.

Anthrax is a disease caused by a bacterial organism that produces spores. These infectious spores may persist on a contaminated item for many years. Anthrax is present in many

locations in the world and exists on animal hair, wool, hides, bone, meat, and in the air. Specifically, anthrax spores have been found on goatskin handicrafts from Haiti. Travelers to Caribbean countries are advised not to purchase Haitian goatskin handicrafts. An estimated 27 to 50 percent of goatskin products (drums, voodoo dolls, rugs) are contaminated. Importation of goatskin handicrafts from Haiti is not permitted.

Marine life and the various risks they present to swimmers and divers, varies greatly worldwide. Jellyfish stings are the most common health concern for most bathers. Envenomation from jellyfish tentacles may range from mildly or moderately irritating to life threatening. Aquatic life bites or stings generally vary depending on geographic location and marine life presence. Maintaining a safe distance from most marine life will prevent many injuries.

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