



# African Snakebite Institute

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## REPTILE NEWS

Hi all,

I have just returned from the Mining Indaba in Cape Town where I have made contact with a variety of mines and companies specialising in first aid training from all over Africa. It was an excellent expo and the new clients that I have on board should keep me out of trouble for some time.

We are making very good progress with the snakebite first aid kit and hope to have a prototype available in the near future. It will be a comprehensive first aid kit for snakebite with pressure bandages, a bag valve mask, equipment to deal with venom in the eyes as well as clear instructions on what to do in the event of a snakebite. In most snakebites it is a lack of breathing that results in human fatalities and this can be avoided if the correct procedures are followed.

We are still in the peak of the snakebite season with regular reports streaming in. A large number of people are being bitten by an insignificant-looking little snake that is often confused for a harmless snake.

The Stiletto snake (*Atractaspis bibronii*), also known as a Side-stabbing snake and previously called a Burrowing Adder. It averages around 30 cm in length with a maximum length of around 70 cm. In parts of its distribution this little snake is uniform purple-brown to black above and below but may have a bluish appearance just before shedding. In some parts of its range the belly is white.





**Top photograph:** Stiletto snake from the Bluff, Durban. Photograph by Warren Dick . **Bottom left photograph:** When confronted this snake will often arch its neck as it tries to burrow into the sand. **Bottom right photograph:** The fang of a Stiletto snake

It is found throughout most of the wetter parts of South Africa but is absent from the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Lesotho and large parts of the Northern Cape where it spends most of its time underground in burrows where it feeds on burrowing reptiles, frogs and small rodents. Because of its underground existence it is seldom seen on the surface except for warm summer nights especially during or after rain.

The big problem with the Stiletto snake is that it cannot be handled safely in any way as its short, sharp fangs point backwards and have a degree of rotation, enabling the snake to let a fang protrude and use it in a stabbing manner. It is also our only snake that cannot be held behind the head as if often unnecessarily done when a snake handler catches a snake – the snake just twists its head to one side and one of the fangs will get you. Youngsters looking for snakes are at risk as they often flip rocks or destroy deserted termite mounds in search of snakes and come across this species. But even experienced snake handlers often get themselves bitten.

The venom of this snake is potently cytotoxic or cell-destroying causing severe pain, excessive swelling and in many cases necrosis that may result in the loss of a finger. It is not considered potentially fatal but there is a likelihood that you could spend several days in a hospital.

As for treatment there is no antivenom for the bite of this snake and very little that doctors can do. Victims usually receive painkillers and may be injected with cortisone, antihistamine and antibiotics but there is very little evidence that such treatment has benefits (except of course for the painkillers). The site of the bite often discolours within a day going very dark and blisters may develop. It is never a good idea to cut the wound to relieve pressure as this may lead to secondary infection. Blisters may be lanced to drain fluid but large cuts should be avoided at all cost. In cases where severe necrosis develop doctors should avoid cutting for at least 5-7 days.

As for first aid there is little that can be done – get to a hospital and seek treatment for pain. And sweat it out!

#### **Next Snake Courses:**

02 March 2013 – Snake Awareness and Venomous Snake Handling Course at Heia Safari Ranch, Muldersdrift.

09 March 2013 – Snake Awareness and Venomous Snake Handling Course at DumaZulu Lodge, Hluhluwe.

Go to [www.reptileventures.com](http://www.reptileventures.com) for more details or contact me.

**Micro Bag Valve Masks.** I have had a lot of orders for Micro Bag Valve Masks and am out of stock. A new shipment is expected soon.

Kind regards,

**Johan Marais**

*Author of A Complete Guide to Snakes of Southern Africa*

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