



# Diphtheria factsheet

## What is diphtheria?

Diphtheria is a serious infection caused by *Corynebacterium diphtheriae* (or sometimes *Corynebacterium ulcerans*) bacteria. Some strains of the bacteria produce a toxin (poison) that can cause severe illness.

Diphtheria was previously very rare in Australia due to high vaccination rates and improved living conditions. However, cases have recently re-emerged in parts of Australia, including Western Australia.

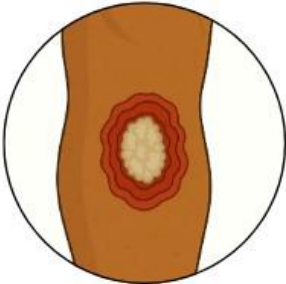
## What are the signs and symptoms of diphtheria?

Symptoms usually appear 2 to 5 days after exposure (but can range from 1 to 10 days). Diphtheria can affect the throat or the skin.



### Respiratory (throat) diphtheria

- Often starts like a cold with sore throat, fever and chills
- Can cause a thick greyish-white coating in the back of the nose or throat
- Can worsen, making it difficult to breathe or swallow
- May cause swollen, painful glands in the neck
- Can become life-threatening.



### Cutaneous (skin) diphtheria

- Can start from any infected cut or wound
- Usually appears as sores or ulcers that may be slow to heal, often on the legs
- May be covered with a grey, moist scab
- Is usually less severe but can still spread to others.

Complications are mainly caused by the toxin (poison) produced by the bacteria and can include:

- heart inflammation, which can cause abnormal heart rhythms
- nerve damage, which may lead to muscle weakness or temporary paralysis.

In severe cases, paralysis can affect the diaphragm, leading to pneumonia or respiratory failure.

## How is diphtheria spread?

Diphtheria spreads through close contact with an infected person:

- breathing in droplets from coughing or sneezing
- direct contact with saliva, respiratory secretions, or infected skin sores
- contact with contaminated items such as bandages, towels or utensils.

People with diphtheria can spread the infection from shortly before symptoms start until they have been treated with antibiotics.

## What should I do if I have symptoms?

- **Seek urgent medical care** if you have a sore throat with fever and difficulty breathing or swallowing.
- **See a doctor as soon as possible** if you have skin sores or ulcers that are not healing.

Diphtheria is confirmed by testing a swab from the throat or skin sore in a laboratory.

## How can diphtheria be prevented?

Vaccination is the most effective protection against diphtheria. Make sure you and your family are up to date with vaccinations, including booster doses for teenagers and adults. Diphtheria vaccine is usually given with tetanus and pertussis (whooping cough) as DTP or dTpa.

You can also reduce the risk of infection and help prevent spread to others by:

- covering your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing
- throwing away used tissues in the bin
- washing hands regularly with soap and water, especially before preparing food, after coughing or sneezing, and before and after touching skin sores or dressings
- keeping sores and wounds clean and covered, such as with dressings or large band-aids
- avoiding close contact with people who are unwell
- staying home if unwell and limiting contact with others.



## While you have diphtheria

Diphtheria is treated with antibiotics. In more severe cases, antitoxin may be needed to stop the toxin from causing further damage. Skin infections may need regular wound care and dressings.

### Respiratory (throat) diphtheria

- Stay in hospital or at home away from others while you complete your antibiotics
- Do not go to work, school, childcare or group gatherings until tests show you are no longer infectious
- Avoid sharing items like towels or utensils
- Wear a mask if you need to be around others.

### Cutaneous (skin) diphtheria

- Keep sores or ulcers covered, preferably with a waterproof dressing
- Do not go to work, school, childcare or group gatherings until sores or ulcers are improving and you have had at least 3 days of antibiotics.

## Notifiable disease

Diphtheria is a notifiable disease, which means information about cases is shared with the Department of Health. This information is confidential. Public health staff may contact people with diphtheria to:

- help identify how the infection occurred
- identify contacts who may be at risk
- provide advice on testing, vaccination and treatment
- advise whether they should stay home from work, school, childcare or group gatherings.

## For further information

Contact your local public health unit during office hours:

Kimberley: **9194 1630**

Pilbara: **9174 1660**

Goldfields: **9080 8200**

Midwest: **9956 1985**

Wheatbelt: **9690 1720**

Boorloo (Perth): **9222 8588**

Southwest: **9781 2359**

Great Southern: **9842 7500**

Or call Healthdirect Australia: **1800 022 222**