



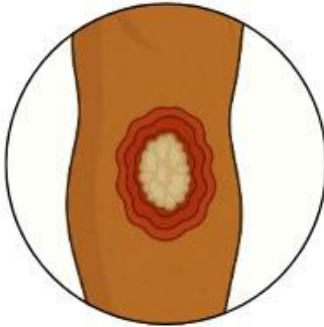
# Diphtheria factsheet

## What is diphtheria?

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



**Respiratory (throat) diphtheria** can cause a thick grey coating in the back of the nose or throat that makes it hard to breathe or swallow. These infections can lead to serious complications affecting the heart and nerves. Around 5-10% of severe cases are fatal, even with treatment.



**Cutaneous (skin) diphtheria** can cause infected sores or ulcers that may be slow to heal. This is usually less severe than respiratory diphtheria, but the infection can spread to others.

Diphtheria has been very rare in Australia due to high vaccination rates and improved living conditions. However, cases have re-emerged in parts of northern Australia in recent years and have now spread to Western Australia.

## How is diphtheria spread?

The diphtheria bacteria live in the mouth, throat and nose of an infected person and can be passed to others by coughing or sneezing. Sometimes spread of bacteria occurs from infected skin sores or through contact with contaminated items, such as bandages and towels.

## What are the signs and symptoms of diphtheria?

The symptoms generally appear 2 to 5 days after exposure, with a range of 1 to 10 days.

**Respiratory diphtheria** starts like a cold with fever, chills and sore throat, which can get worse and make it hard to swallow and breathe. Some people also have serious heart and nerve problems.

**Cutaneous diphtheria** may start from any sore or wound that gets infected, especially on the legs. It may become a deep ulcer that is slow to heal, sometimes covered with a grey moist scab.

## How do I know if I have diphtheria?

If you have a severe sore throat along with fever and difficulty swallowing and breathing **go to the clinic or hospital immediately**. If you have skin sores and ulcers that are not healing, **go to the clinic or hospital as soon as possible**.

Diphtheria can only be confirmed after your doctor takes a small sample from your throat or skin wound. The sample is tested in a laboratory.

## How is diphtheria treated?

If your doctor thinks you have respiratory diphtheria you will be started on antibiotics. In more severe cases, you may be given a special “antitoxin” to stop the poison. Some people may need support with breathing, including a tube placed in the throat.

People with cutaneous (skin) diphtheria need strong antibiotics and clean dressings for their sores or ulcers.

## While you have diphtheria

**Respiratory diphtheria:** You will need to stay in hospital or stay away from other people while you have treatment and until you are better.

**Cutaneous diphtheria:** You will need to make sure your sores are covered. You should stay away from other people until your sores are getting better and you have finished at least 3 days of antibiotic treatment.

## How can diphtheria be prevented?

Vaccination is the best protection against diphtheria. Make sure that your vaccinations for diphtheria are up-to-date – diphtheria vaccines are usually combined with tetanus and pertussis (whooping cough) in one shot, written as “DTP” or “dTpa”.

You can also reduce the spread of diphtheria bacteria by:

- covering your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze
- throwing tissues in the bin after you use them
- washing your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze, and before and after treating infected skin sores and wounds
- keeping cuts and wounds clean and covering them with fresh dressings, such as large band-aids
- avoiding close contact with people who have colds.



Diphtheria is a notifiable disease, and all cases are contacted by the local public health unit. Family members and other close contacts may need testing, vaccination and antibiotic treatment to protect them from infection. Notification is confidential.

## For further information

Contact your local public health unit during office hours:

**Kimberley Public Health Unit:** (08) 9194 1630

**Pilbara Public Health Unit:** (08) 9174 1660

**Goldfields Public Health Unit:** (08) 9080 8200

**Midwest Public Health Unit:** (08) 9956 1985

**Wheatbelt Public Health Unit:** (08) 9690 1720

**Boorloo (Perth) Public Health Unit:** (08) 9222 8588

**Southwest Public Health Unit:** (08) 9781 2359

**Great Southern Public Health Unit:** (08) 9842 7500

Or contact Healthdirect Australia on 1800 022 222.