

Diphtheria

Frequently Asked Questions

What is diphtheria?

Diphtheria is a rare but serious bacterial infection that mainly affects the nose, throat, and sometimes skin. It can cause a thick coating in the throat, making it hard to breathe or swallow.

Is diphtheria common in Australia?

Diphtheria is uncommon in Australia because most people are immunised. However, outbreaks can still occur, particularly due to:

- returning overseas travellers
- low immunisation rates in some communities.

How do you catch diphtheria?

Diphtheria spreads from person to person through:

- coughing or sneezing
- close contact (like kissing)
- touching infected skin sores (for skin diphtheria).

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms usually start 2 to 5 days after infection and may include:

- sore throat
- fever
- swollen glands in the neck
- trouble breathing or swallowing
- a thick, grey coating at the back of the throat.

Skin diphtheria can cause:

- painful sores or ulcers.

Why is diphtheria dangerous?

Diphtheria can produce a toxin (poison) that can damage:

- the heart
- the nerves
- the kidneys.

In severe cases, it can be **life-threatening**.

How can I protect myself?

Immunisation is the best protection against diphtheria.

- In Australia, diphtheria immunisation is part of the routine childhood immunisation schedule, with doses recommended for children at 2, 4, 6 and 18 months, and 4 years of age and adolescents at 11 – 13 years of age.
- Adults may also need a booster every 5 to 10 years especially if travelling.
- You can check your immunisation status by visiting your local Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (ACCHO), community health clinic, or GP.
- The diphtheria vaccine has been used for many years and is safe and effective. Side effects are usually mild, such as a sore arm or mild fever.

How is diphtheria treated?

Diphtheria is treated urgently in hospital with:

- **Antitoxin** to stop the toxin's effects
- **Antibiotics** to clear the infection

Early treatment is very important.

What should I do if I think I have diphtheria?

Seek medical care **immediately**.

Call your GP or go to the nearest hospital — do not delay.