

Diphtheria

Diphtheria is an infectious disease that can spread from person-to-person. It is very rare in New Zealand. The bacteria usually infects people's throats, which can cause issues swallowing and breathing. It can also cause skin infections.

Diphtheria is treated with antibiotics. The earlier someone starts taking medication, the less risk there is of them becoming very unwell and passing on the disease to others.

A vaccine is available to help protect against diphtheria.



How does diphtheria spread

Diphtheria can spread from person to person by:

- coughing or sneezing
- kissing
- contact with contaminated objects or food
- contact with an infected wound or skin sore
- spending lots of time with an infected person, or
- being in close contact with an infected person (e.g. sharing a bed).

Sometimes a person has a mild case of diphtheria and they don't realise they're sick. They can still pass on the infection. To help stop the bacteria spreading you can:

- cover up coughs and sneezes
- wash and dry your hands regularly
- cover up skin sores.



Signs and symptoms

Symptoms can include some or all of the following:

- fever (may be mild)
- sore throat
- headache
- difficulty breathing
- bad breath
- sleepiness
- swollen glands
- white patches on the tonsils

- a greyish coating in the throat
- bark-like cough
- skin sores or rashes.

People with a throat infection caused by diphtheria may have trouble breathing and swallowing. If left untreated diphtheria can lead to serious complications, including heart failure, paralysis and death.



Seeking health advice

If you or someone you live with is sick with one or more of these symptoms ring your doctor or call Healthline (0800 611 116) straight away – whatever the time, day or night. When you ring:

- say what the symptoms are
- tell the health professional if you have been in contact with someone with diphtheria
- if the illness gets worse, go straight back to a doctor or ring Healthline again.



Protecting yourself and others

Diphtheria can affect anyone of any age. Being immunised as a child is the best way to gain protection, but your immunity wears off as you grow older. This is why it's important to get immunisation boosters throughout your life.

In New Zealand:

- all babies can be immunised against diphtheria as part of their free childhood immunisations at six weeks, three months and five months old
- booster doses are also given to children for free when they are four and 11 years old
- immunisation is not just for children – diphtheria boosters are also offered at 45 and 65 years of age.

Talk to your doctor if you think you or members of your family are due to be immunised.



What do close contacts need to do?

If you have close contact with someone with diphtheria you could be at higher risk of catching it too. To protect yourself and others you may be given free antibiotics and vaccine boosters.

Close contacts include:

- people who live with the infected person
- people who have kissed the person
- people who have slept in the same room as the person for at least one night
- people who have shared a kitchen or bathroom with the person
- child minders (if the infected person is a child)
- children who were regularly supervised by a person with diphtheria
- health care staff who have treated the person without appropriate PPE.

Contacts at lower risk

If you have only had brief or minimal contact with someone with diphtheria the risk of you catching the disease is much lower. This may include, for example, people who work with or go to school with the person with diphtheria but do not interact with them closely.

If you are at lower risk you will not require any treatment but to be safe you should:

- watch out for the signs and symptoms of diphtheria
- check with your doctor on whether you are fully immunised



For more information

- healthnz.govt.nz/diphtheria

For information on diphtheria immunisation visit:

- healthnz.govt.nz/diphtheria-tetanus-whooping-cough-and-polio-vaccine

For health advice call your doctor, or ring Healthline for free anytime on 0800 611 116. Healthline has interpreters available for those who need one.