



# Diphtheria

## What is diphtheria?

Diphtheria is a serious disease caused by bacteria that are found in the mouth, throat and nose of an infected person. It can cause a membrane to grow around the inside of the person's throat and choke them, making it hard to swallow or breathe. The bacteria produce a powerful toxin that can spread through the body and cause paralysis and heart failure. About 10% of people who get diphtheria die of it.

## Is it still possible to catch diphtheria?

In the early to mid 20th century, diphtheria caused more deaths in Australia than any other infectious disease. Fortunately, effective vaccines against diphtheria have now made it uncommon in this country.

However, wherever people are not properly immunised, outbreaks can still occur. This happened in the early 1990s in the new independent states of the former Soviet Union, where immunisation rates fell. In 1994, more than 47,000 cases of diphtheria were recorded and 1,746 people died.

## How can I protect myself and my family against diphtheria?

To be protected, you need a diphtheria vaccine. This comes in different combinations and your doctor will know which one is right for you or your child. The diphtheria vaccine is combined with the tetanus and pertussis vaccine for adults and children.



Children should receive the vaccine at 2, 4, and 6 months of age, with boosters at four years of age and leaving school (15-19 years).

Adults should have a booster dose at 50 years (combined with tetanus and pertussis), and people travelling overseas should have their immunisation updated.

## How does the vaccine work?

The vaccine stimulates the body to produce an antibody, which protects it against the diphtheria toxin.

## Is the vaccine safe?

The diphtheria vaccine is safe and effective. Sometimes reactions may occur after immunisation, such as fever, headache, or pain or swelling at the site of injection, but these are uncommon and usually mild. The benefits of immunisation against diphtheria far outweigh any risks of the vaccine.

## Need more information about diphtheria?

Ask your family doctor or your local Public Health Unit, or visit [www.vaccination.org.au](http://www.vaccination.org.au).

