



# 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?

Earlier this 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. Normally the diphtheria vaccine is combined with the tetanus vaccine for adults, or the tetanus and pertussis (whooping cough) vaccines for children.



Children should receive the vaccine at 2, 4, 6 and 18 months of age, with boosters at four years of age and leaving school (15-19 years).

Adults should have a booster dose every 10 years, and people travelling overseas should have their immunisation updated.

## How does the vaccine work?

The vaccine stimulates the body to

produce an antitoxin, 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.

