



# Diphtheria factsheet

for Aboriginal Environmental Health Practitioners

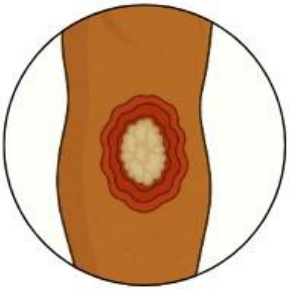
## What is diphtheria?

Diphtheria (diff-THEER-e-uh) is a contagious and serious infection caused by the diphtheria bacteria. Some types of the bacteria make a toxin (poison) that can cause serious illness. Diphtheria can affect the throat or the skin.



### Respiratory (throat) diphtheria

- Often starts like a cold with sore throat, fever and chills.
- Can cause a thick greyish-white coating in the back of the nose or throat.
- Can worsen, making it difficult to breathe or swallow.
- May cause swollen, painful glands in the neck.
- Can become life-threatening.



### Cutaneous (skin) diphtheria

- Can start from a cut or wound that becomes infected.
- Usually appears as sores or ulcers that are slow to heal, often on the legs.
- May be covered with a grey, moist scab.
- Is usually less likely to lead to serious illness, but can still spread to others.

## How is diphtheria spread?

Diphtheria spreads through close contact with an infected person. It can happen from:

- breathing in droplets from coughing or sneezing
- contact with saliva, respiratory secretions (snot), or infected skin sores
- contact with contaminated items such as bandages, towels, bedding, clothing or utensils.

People can spread the infection from shortly before symptoms start until they have had antibiotics.

## Who is more likely to get diphtheria?

- People who are not vaccinated or not fully vaccinated.
- Close contacts of someone with diphtheria.
- People living in homes with lots of people – infections can spread more easily.
- Young children and people with weakened immune systems are more likely to develop severe illness.

## What can Aboriginal environmental health practitioners do to help?

Aboriginal environmental health practitioners play an important role in reducing skin infections and preventing their spread by addressing living conditions and supporting access to early treatment.

Aboriginal environmental health practitioners can help by:

- supporting people to improve home hygiene and reduce spread of skin infections
- supporting environmental health home assessments and housing repairs
- identifying skin sores early and supporting referral to local health services
- promoting skin health, early treatment and follow up care
- encouraging diphtheria vaccination and booster doses.

## Key prevention messages

- Vaccination gives strong protection from severe diphtheria.
- Diphtheria vaccine is given with tetanus and whooping cough (DTPa or dTpa), or with tetanus (dT).
- Clinics can check diphtheria vaccine status and give boosters if needed.
- Cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing.
- Throw used tissues and bandages in the bin.
- Wash hands often with soap and water – especially before preparing food, after coughing or sneezing, and before and after touching skin sores or dressings.
- Keep sores and ulcers clean and covered.
- Get skin conditions such as tinea, eczema and scabies treated early – healthy, unbroken skin is less likely to become infected.
- Avoid close contact with people who are unwell, including in sleeping areas.
- If unwell, stay home and limit contact with others.
- Provide Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia [diphtheria flyer](#) for more information.



## Household checks

- Check kitchens, bathrooms, laundries and toilets for functional health hardware.
- Check if there are enough cleaning, hygiene and wound care supplies (e.g. soaps, dressings).
- Check if there are enough beds for everybody. If not, discuss options to reduce the likelihood of contracting or spreading diphtheria and other illnesses.

## Yarns with community members and households

- Encourage everyone to check their vaccination status with the clinic.
- Talk about going to the clinic as soon as possible for a sore throat, especially if they have trouble breathing or swallowing.
- Talk about going to the clinic if a skin sore is not getting better.
- Talk about keeping distance from people who are unwell.
- Ask if everyone has their own towel.
- Talk about regularly washing clothes, towels, bedding, and shared items.

For more information, contact your local [Public Health Unit](#) during office hours:

Kimberley: **9194 1630**

Pilbara: **9174 1660**

Goldfields: **9080 8200**

Midwest: **9956 1985**

Wheatbelt: **9690 1720**

Boorloo (Perth): **9222 8588**

Southwest: **9781 2359**

Great Southern: **9842 7500**