

# Diphtheria Information Sheet

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## What is it?

Diphtheria, pronounced dip-thee-rea is a rare infection caused by a bacteria which mainly affects the throat, nose and sometimes the skin. It causes a greyish covering in the throat, and leads to difficulty swallowing and breathing.

The last recorded case of diphtheria in the throat in New Zealand was in 1998, and since then there have been a number of cases affecting the skin.



A child with diphtheria  
<http://www.theglobaldispatch.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/diphtheria.jpg>

## What are the signs and symptoms?

Symptoms usually start within 2-5 days of contact with the bacteria, but may start up to 10 days later.

The symptoms are:

- A thick grey-white coating at the back of the throat
- A high temperature (fever) of 38 degrees Celsius or more
- Sore throat
- Breathing difficulties

- Swollen glands in the neck
- Bad breath
- Headache
- Barking cough



Thick grey coating in throat from diphtheria  
[http://www.healthline.com/hlcmsresource/images/Clinical-Large-Images/648x364\\_Diphtheria.jpg](http://www.healthline.com/hlcmsresource/images/Clinical-Large-Images/648x364_Diphtheria.jpg)

## How serious is it?

The diphtheria bacteria produces a poison (or toxin) which damages the breathing tubes in your nose and throat. The bacteria can also travel through your blood to affect other areas.

Diphtheria can make it hard to breathe and swallow, which means 5-10% of people with diphtheria will die from it.

The infection can also cause damage to your heart, kidneys and nerves.

Diphtheria is a notifiable disease under the Health Act. This means your doctor must tell the District Health Board (DHB) if you have it. You will be contacted by a health care worker at the DHB to find out how you might have got diphtheria.

## *Who is most at risk?*

- People who have not been immunised with Diphtheria vaccine.
- Those with a weakened immune system and older people.

## *How could I get infected?*

The infection can be spread by:

- coughs and sneezes
- touching the open sores of someone who has the infection
- touching things an infected person has touched, such as clothing or bedding

## *How do I protect myself and others?*

Immunisations are the best protection.

Babies are given diphtheria immunisations at 6 weeks, 3 months and 5 months of age. Babies are not protected until they have had all three initial doses. Children and adults are given booster doses at 4 years, 11 years and 45 years of age. Contact your GP, Well Child or Tamariki Ora provider to check if your family has been immunised.

## *Will I need to take time off work, school or preschool?*

Yes. You are likely to be very unwell and need to be in an isolation room in hospital until you are not infectious (usually 48 hours after starting antibiotics). Full recovery from the illness may take a long time. You may need to stay in hospital due to pain, breathing and swallowing difficulties.

## *How is it treated?*

Diphtheria is treated with an antitoxin to stop the toxin produced by the bacteria damaging the body, and with antibiotics to kill the bacteria.

## *Where can I get further information?*

For further information on diphtheria please contact your doctor or Hawke's Bay District Health Board Population Health on (06) 834 1815. You can also phone Healthline on 0800 611 116 at any time of the day or night to speak to a registered nurse.