



One minute guide to...

Diphtheria

What is it?

Diphtheria is a life-threatening, but vaccine-preventable bacterial infection. It is highly contagious spread by coughs and sneezes or through close contact with someone who is infected. You can also get it by sharing items, such as cups, cutlery, clothing or bedding with an infected person.

It is rare in the UK because babies and children have been routinely vaccinated against it since the 1940s. There has been a small rise in the number of cases as vaccination rates have fallen since the Covid-19 pandemic; or adults through travelling to countries where diphtheria is prevalent. The [routine childhood immunisation schedule](#) includes vaccination against diphtheria.

What are the symptoms?

Respiratory diphtheria symptoms usually start 2 to 5 days after becoming infected.

- a thick grey-white coating that may cover the back of your throat, nose and tongue, and nausea.
- a high temperature (fever) and sore throat
- swollen glands in your neck ('Bull Neck')
- difficulty breathing and swallowing.

Cutaneous (skin infection) diphtheria is more commonly found in countries with poor hygiene and symptoms include pus-filled blisters on your legs, feet and hands; and large ulcers surrounded by red, sore looking skin.

What to do if you have symptoms of diphtheria:

Cases are rare and many other more common illnesses have similar symptoms, but your risk of infection is greater if you have not received the vaccine doses recommended.

If you have symptoms of diphtheria:

Get Urgent Advice from your GP (or equivalent if abroad) AND:

- You are in or have recently returned from an area of the world where the infection is widespread. Latest outbreaks can be found at: [NaTHNaC - Country List \(travelhealthpro.org.uk\)](#)
- You have been in close contact with someone who has diphtheria.

Diphtheria needs to be treated quickly in hospital to help prevent serious complications, such as breathing difficulties or heart problems.

If you are unable to contact your GP, call NHS 111 here: [NHS111](#)

Treatments:

- [antibiotics](#) to kill the diphtheria bacteria.
- medicines that stop the effects of the harmful substances (toxins) produced by the bacteria.
- thoroughly cleaning any infected wounds if you have diphtheria affecting your skin.

Treatment usually lasts 2 to 3 weeks. Any skin ulcers usually heal within 2 to 3 months but may leave a scar.

People who have been in close contact with someone who has diphtheria may also need to take antibiotics or may be given a dose of the diphtheria vaccination.

Maintain extremely good hand and respiratory hygiene:

It is VERY important to use good hand (washing hands regularly), and respiratory (use tissues and throw away) hygiene at all times, not sharing clothing, bedding, cups, and cutlery etc.

Further Information:

Further information can be found in: [Here](#); and [Diphtheria - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](#)

Guide developed by the Education IPC Public Health & Communities Team Cumbria February 24



Working for Cumberland Council and Westmorland & Furness Council