



Diphtheria high-risk contact letter

You have been identified as a likely **high-risk contact** of a person diagnosed with diphtheria. Although it is unlikely that a contact will develop diphtheria, this letter is to inform you about the disease and to advise what you need to do.

What is diphtheria?

Diphtheria is a serious infection that is usually caused by *Corynebacterium diphtheriae* bacteria. Some strains of the bacteria produce a toxin that can cause severe illness. There are two main types of diphtheria:

- **Respiratory (throat) diphtheria** can cause a thick grey coating in the back of the nose or throat that makes it hard to breathe or swallow. These infections can lead to serious complications affecting the heart and nerves. Around 5-10% of severe cases are fatal, even with treatment.
- **Cutaneous (skin) diphtheria** can cause infected sores or ulcers that may be slow to heal. This is usually less severe than respiratory diphtheria, but the infection can spread to others.

How is diphtheria spread?

The diphtheria bacteria live in the mouth, throat and nose of an infected person and can be passed to others by coughing or sneezing. Sometimes spread of bacteria occurs from infected skin sores or through contact with contaminated items, such as bandages and towels.

Do I need to take any special precautions?

- Look out for symptoms for at least 7 days from your last contact with the infected person.
- You may be asked to have a combined nose and throat swab collected; and if present, a swab of any skin sores or wounds that look infected. These will be sent for laboratory testing.
- You may be given a course of preventive antibiotics (e.g. for adults, azithromycin 500mg once daily for 7 days) if you do not have any contradictions.
- Avoid contact with people who are vulnerable to diphtheria (e.g. young infants, the elderly, those requiring dependent care, immunosuppressed individuals) until any swabs performed are found to be negative or you have completed 72 hours of antibiotics.
- Healthcare workers may be advised to stay home or take additional precautions at work (e.g. wearing a mask) until any swabs performed are found to be negative or 72 hours of antibiotics have been completed.
- If your last dose of diphtheria-containing vaccine (e.g. dTpa or ADT) was more than 12 months ago, you should have another dose now.

If you develop symptoms or signs consistent with the respiratory or cutaneous types of diphtheria, you should urgently consult your doctor or the emergency department of the closest hospital. **Please call ahead before you attend so the health service can take appropriate precautions. Wear a mask if you have throat symptoms, cover any sores, and take this letter with you.**

For further information

Contact your local public health unit during office hours:

Kimberley Public Health Unit: (08) 9194 1630

Goldfields Public Health Unit: (08) 9080 8200

Wheatbelt Public Health Unit: (08) 9690 1720

Southwest Public Health Unit: (08) 9781 2359

Pilbara Public Health Unit: (08) 9174 1660

Midwest Public Health Unit: (08) 9956 1985

Boorloo (Perth) Public Health Unit: (08) 9222 8588

Great Southern Public Health Unit: (08) 9842 7500

Or contact Healthdirect Australia on 1800 022 222.