



HEALTH INFORMATION

Diphtheria

Diphtheria is a bacterial infection that produces a poison (toxin) that can infect your nose, throat and skin. It is easy to catch, as it spreads mostly through coughs and sneezes. It can be a very serious, even fatal, especially for babies and young children.

Before diphtheria vaccines were introduced in the 1940s, diphtheria was a major cause of death for children worldwide. Now countries with good vaccine programmes rarely have outbreaks. However, in less wealthy countries, where routine vaccines are not always widely available, diphtheria remains a problem and remains a risk for unvaccinated travellers.

Diphtheria is found in areas of Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East and rarely in Europe.

Diphtheria is sometimes reported in unvaccinated travellers who have visited higher risk areas. If you spend long periods of time with local people, for example visiting family abroad, your chance of exposure may be higher. Diphtheria spreads via coughs and colds and occasionally from direct contact with other people's infected skin.

A type of diphtheria can be carried by animals, including cattle. Human cases have been linked to consumption of raw (unpasteurised) dairy products. Close contact with animals in higher risk areas can also put you at risk.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms usually appear between two and seven days after you have been exposed to the bacteria and can include:

- Breathing problems
- Hoarse voice
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Discharge and crusting around your nose
- Swollen, tender glands in your neck
- Fever
- Pale, blue skin

Complications

The most severe complication of diphtheria is the blockage of your throat, as it could stop your breathing. You can also develop an abnormal heartbeat, which can cause heart problems. Inflammation of the heart muscle and valves can also develop, which many years later may lead to long term heart problems.

How to reduce risks?

- Avoiding close contact with anyone with symptoms
- Avoid touching skin ulcers
- Avoid unpasteurised dairy products and close contact with farm animals

Most importantly - get vaccinated!

If a diphtheria vaccine is recommended for your destination and you have not had a dose in the past ten years or you have never had the vaccine, see your GP, nurse or a travel clinic for advice.

Vaccination is recommended for:

- All babies from the age of two months of age, as part of the UK's routine vaccination programme
- Anyone going to countries where diphtheria is common and has not had vaccine in the past ten years
- Anyone at risk through their job, for example: healthcare workers and people who work in laboratories
- Anyone who has never been vaccinated

In the UK, the diphtheria vaccine is given in combination with polio and tetanus.