

Clinician Alert

Communicable Diseases Branch

Population Health Division



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Diphtheria

Situation

Key points:

1. Case numbers continue to rise from a large outbreak of diphtheria, primarily among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Northern Territory and Western Australia.
2. Clinicians should consider diphtheria when a patient presents with a clinically compatible illness, especially if they have had direct or indirect contact with a remote Aboriginal community.
3. Vaccination is the most effective protection against diphtheria. Ensure all patients are up to date with vaccinations.
4. **First Nations people 20 years and older in Queensland are now eligible for state funded dTpa vaccine (Boostrix) (see table).**
5. Notify your local [public health unit](#) immediately of any suspected diphtheria cases.

From 1 January to 11 May 2026, 194 cases of diphtheria have been notified in Australia, markedly higher than in all previous years since national notification commenced in 1991. Of these:

- 69% were cutaneous infections, 30% were respiratory infections, and 1% reported with unknown clinical presentation.
- 117 cases were among residents of the Northern Territory, 71 in Western Australia, 4 in South Australia, and 2 in Queensland.
- 94% of cases were among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

In Queensland, three sporadic cutaneous diphtheria cases have been notified in 2026, with the most recent case notified on 16 May 2026. Of these cases, one was acquired overseas, and two were linked to Western Australia; one case had no apparent epidemiological links to the current outbreak, while the other case reported travel to the outbreak area in the Kimberley region.

Clinical presentation

- **Cutaneous diphtheria:** Chronic, non-healing sores or shallow ulcers that can develop a greyish membrane.

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- **Respiratory diphtheria:** Sore throat, low grade fever, pharyngeal exudate and a greyish white pseudomembrane overlying the tonsils, pharynx or nasal passages, enlarged anterior cervical lymph nodes and soft tissue oedema.

Testing and treatment

	Specimen/s	Test	Pathology request
Respiratory Diphtheria	(i) Throat OR Nasopharyngeal swab	Culture and PCR	Request form should state “ URGENT – culture for suspected diphtheria ” to expedite processing.
Cutaneous Diphtheria	(i) Skin ulcer AND (ii) Throat swab		

Seek specialist infectious disease advice on appropriate antibiotic therapy and the need for diphtheria antitoxin (DAT). Guidance is available on how to [access DAT](#) in Queensland via the Special Access Scheme.

Infection prevention and control measures:

- Ensure standard and droplet precautions are used when taking swabs for testing including a surgical mask, glasses, gloves and gown. Isolate suspected cases immediately.

Vaccination

- Available diphtheria-toxoid vaccines include dTpa, DTPa and dT vaccines.
- First Nations people 20 years and older in Queensland are now eligible for state funded dTpa vaccine (Boostrix)

Diphtheria-containing vaccination recommendations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in QLD:

Vaccination status	Action	NIP/state-funded vaccine
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people <u>under 20 years</u> who are unvaccinated or require catch up vaccination	Vaccinate in accordance with the Qld Immunisation Schedule/Australian Immunisation Handbook	NIP funded DTPa/dTpa containing vaccines
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people <u>aged 20 years and over</u> who <u>have not</u> previously received 3 doses	Offer further doses to complete a primary course (3 doses) with a minimum interval of 4 weeks between doses	State-funded Boostrix
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people <u>aged 20 years and over</u> who <u>have previously received</u> at least 3 doses with the most recent dose more than 10 years ago	Offer a booster dose of a diphtheria-containing vaccine	State-funded Boostrix

See the [Australian Immunisation Handbook | Diphtheria](#) for further information and recommendations for diphtheria vaccination in children, adolescents, pregnant people, and adults.

Further information

Fact sheet [Diphtheria | Queensland Health](#)

[Immunisation schedules and programs | Queensland Health](#)

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19 May 2026