Diphtheria (outbreak response) Immunisation Program

Healthcare Professional Fact Sheet

Diphtheria is a throat and nose infection, or skin infection that can cause severe complications including breathing difficulties, heart failure, nerve damage and death. Even with treatment, 5-10% of unvaccinated people with respiratory diphtheria will die.

Symptoms of diphtheria include:

- Sore throat
- Swollen neck glands
- Discharge from the nose
- Chronic, non-healing skin sores

Diphtheria is suspected when a white or grey membrane is seen on the back of the throat, or over a skin sore, and is confirmed following swabbing and laboratory testing.

The funded Diphtheria (outbreak response) Immunisation Program is in response to increasing notifications of diphtheria in Aboriginal communities since October 2025. As of May 2026, there have been more than 150 cases notified nationally, which is the highest annual total since notifications began in 1991.

Vaccination against diphtheria is effective at preventing severe disease. Vaccines to protect against diphtheria have been safely used in our immunisation programs to protect young children, teenagers and pregnant women against diphtheria for many years.

Diphtheria (outbreak response) Immunisation Program priority areas include:

- Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands
- Oak Valley
- Yalata
- Ceduna (and surrounds)
- Oodnadatta
- Coober Pedy

Healthcare and frontline workers include:

Workers who have direct patient care, emergency and essential service workers (police, paramedics, first responders), education and corrections staff, community service workers with direct community

contact, cleaners/staff who have regular contact with contaminated surfaces, linen and wound dressings, laboratory staff handling specimens.

High and Medium Risk Contacts: as identified in the SA Health – Diphtheria Contact Management Table.

Vaccines

Combination diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis vaccines will be used.

Individuals aged less than 10 years will receive either:

- Tripacel® (Sanofi-Aventis Australia) or Infanrix® (GlaxoSmithKline Australia).

There is no diphtheria vaccine for use in infants less than 6 weeks old.

Individuals aged greater than 10 years will receive either:

- Boostrix® (GlaxoSmithKline Australia) or Adacel® (Sanofi-Aventis Australia).

These diphtheria containing vaccines can be co- administered with other vaccines. Most side effects are mild and only last a few days. Common reactions such as soreness at the injection site, a mild fever or feeling tired and unwell begin within a few hours and go away within a few days.

The vaccine will be offered free of charge to:

- Aboriginal people 10 years and older who have not had a diphtheria-containing vaccination in the past 5 years
- Healthcare & frontline workers who work in program priority areas, as well as those who work with remote visitors from these priority areas to Adelaide, Port Augusta, Port Pirie and Whyalla if more than 5 years since their last diphtheria containing vaccination.
- High and medium risk contacts who have not had a diphtheria-containing vaccination in the past 12 months.
- Low risk contacts who have not had a diphtheria-containing vaccination in the past 5 years.

Vaccine ordering and program staging

Vaccines for the Priority 1- Population-wide vaccination response APY Lands, are ordered through the usual process with SA Health, Northern Territory (NT) Health and Nganampa Health Council (NHC).

Vaccines for the Priority 2: Population-wide vaccination response – beyond APY Lands, immunisation programs offered through routine providers such as GPs, Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) and regional pharmacies. Healthcare and frontline workers have access to the program through local services such as Local Health Networks (LHNs) or SA Ambulance Services (SAAS). Vaccines can be ordered through the SA Health Vaccine Distribution Centre (VDC) usual process by using the appropriate vaccine ordering category (NIP or state funded).

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