



Australian
Centre for
Disease
Control

Diphtheria in Australia – Epidemiological update

As at 27 July 2026

The frequency of the diphtheria epidemiology updates is changing from weekly to fortnightly. This change reflects the relative stabilisation of key epidemiological characteristics, and the declining number of cases reported each week. The next report will be issued during the week commencing 10 August 2026.

Data extracted from NNDSS: 28 July 2026

Latest diagnosis date: 27 July 2026

Due to the dynamic nature of the National Notifiable Diseases Surveillance System (NNDSS) and case investigations, data in this report are subject to retrospective revision and may vary from data reported in other national reports and reports by states and territories. Case definitions for the diseases included in this report are available on the Australian Centre for Disease Control website (<https://www.cdc.gov.au/resources/collections/cdna-surveillance-case-definitions>).

Background

- Diphtheria is an acute illness caused by toxin producing strains of *Corynebacterium diphtheriae* and *Corynebacterium ulcerans*. Infection may lead to two different clinical outcomes: respiratory disease or cutaneous (skin) disease.
- In the early 1900s, diphtheria caused more deaths in Australia than any other infectious disease. Since the implementation of vaccination programs in the 1940s, the incidence of diphtheria has declined in Australia, and globally. Although diphtheria is considered rare in Australia, it remains endemic in many developing countries.
- Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, most Australian cases were imported from overseas, with a high proportion of these cases reported as cutaneous diphtheria.
 - Between 1999 and 2019, cutaneous and respiratory diphtheria occurred mostly among adults. During this period there were 2 deaths reported in unvaccinated adults who both acquired their infections in Australia.
- Between 2020 and 2022, there were 4 localised diphtheria clusters, each in a different geographical area of North Queensland, and involving a high proportion of cutaneous cases and several respiratory cases.
- The [Australian Immunisation Handbook](#) recommends diphtheria-toxoid vaccine for: routine vaccination in infants, children and adolescents; routine booster vaccination in adults, including those in special risk groups such as pregnant women, laboratory workers, and travellers to countries where health services are difficult to access. Vaccination is recommended every 10 years for travellers to countries where health services are difficult to access. Travellers to some areas where there is a higher risk of acquiring diphtheria are recommended to be vaccinated every 5 years.

For further information please refer to the [Australian CDC Diphtheria](#) page.

Key summary points

- A total of 475 confirmed casesⁱ of diphtheria have been notified in Australia in 2026.
- Nationally, cases of diphtheria have continued to decline since peaking between late May and early June, although trends have varied across affected jurisdictions. In the Northern Territory, cases have gradually declined since mid-May, although recent data suggest this decline may be slowing. In Western Australia, cases peaked later, in June, and have generally declined in recent weeks, although with some week-to-week variability.
- In the past fortnight, 24 cases were notifiedⁱⁱ compared with 36 cases in the previous fortnight. Among cases notified this fortnight (n=24):

ⁱ CDNA diphtheria case definition: https://www.cdc.gov.au/system/files/2025-09/diphtheria-surveillance-case-definition_0.pdf

ⁱⁱ Diagnosis date is the preferred public health indicator of disease transmission activity. However, delays between diagnosis and notification to the NNDSS result in incomplete data for more recent weeks. Analyses by notification date can be used as a proxy for more current trends, with an underlying assumption of a stable distribution of reporting lags.

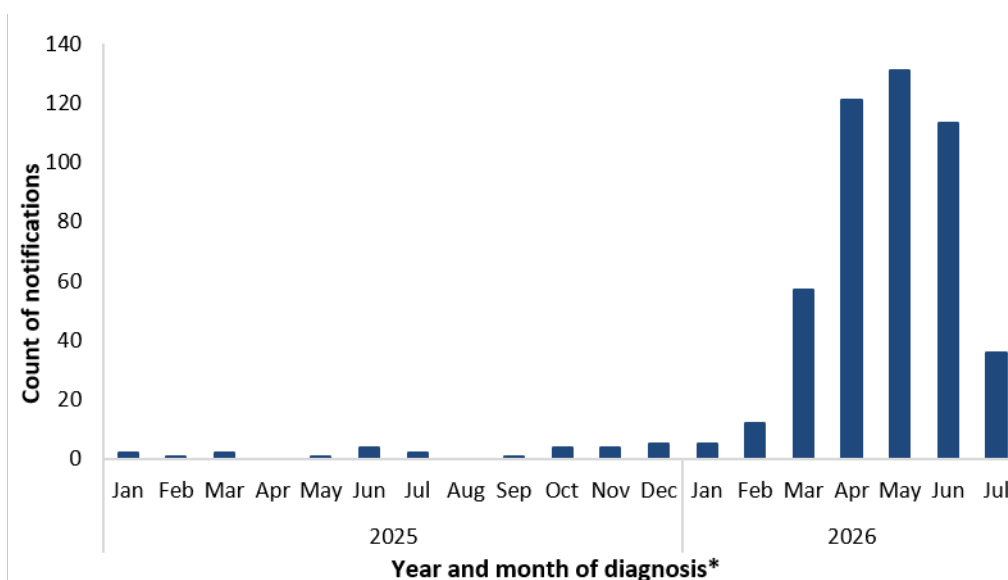
- A higher proportion of notified cases were reported from the Northern Territory (58.3%) compared with Western Australia (41.7%).
- Diagnosis dates among cases ranged from 2 July to 20 July 2026, with 6 cases (25.0%) classified as respiratory diphtheria.
- Newly notified cases predominately acquired their infections in areas with recently reported diphtheria cases.
- In 2026, most cases have been reported in the Northern Territory (54.9%; n=261) and Western Australia (41.5%; n=197), with a few cases in South Australia (2.7%; n=13) and Queensland (0.8%; n=4).
 - Three cutaneous diphtheria cases were acquired overseas.
 - Among locally acquired cases (n=472), almost all are residents in areas classified as 'outer regional', 'remote' or 'very remote' (99.4%).
 - Most cases (95.6%) have been among Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people.
 - Around two-thirds of cases (66.1%) have been cutaneous diphtheria, with 32.2% classified as respiratory diphtheria, and clinical presentation information pending for 8 cases. All of the 153 respiratory diphtheria infections in 2026 have been locally acquired.
 - The median age of cases is 23 years (IQR: 12.0-35.0), with the median age of cutaneous diphtheria cases being higher (26 years) compared to respiratory diphtheria cases (17 years).
 - Overall, around 19% of diphtheria cases have been hospitalised, with the proportion hospitalised being similar by clinical presentation type and noting that cases may be hospitalised for public health management and other reasons.
 - Diphtheria remains a potentially severe disease and can result in serious outcomes.
 - The cause of death for a diphtheria case notified in April 2026 indicates that diphtheria was the probable cause.
- AusTrakka genomic analyses indicate recent cases in Western Australia, the Northern Territory, South Australia and Queensland are genomically linked.
 - Previous analyses suggests that the current cluster shares genomic characteristics of cases from a 2020 to 2023 cluster in Queensland, noting that the findings are not considered definitive epidemiological evidence.
- Vaccination provides strong protection against the severe effects of diphtheria toxin, but it does not consistently prevent carriage or transmission.
 - A high proportion of respiratory diphtheria cases (86.9%) and cutaneous diphtheria cases (78.0%) in 2026 had received at least three valid vaccine doses (primary course).
 - Among cases who had received at least three valid vaccine doses, the median period since last vaccination was lower for cutaneous diphtheria cases (3.6 years) than for respiratory diphtheria cases (7.2 years).
 - Consistent with the National Immunisation Program and broader [Australian Immunisation Handbook](#) recommendations, the number of doses received tended to increase with age.
 - National vaccination coverage rates for children aged 5 years as at September 2025 was 93.4%, with coverage rates higher among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children at 94.7%.

Current epidemiology of diphtheria in Australia

As of 27 July 2026, a total of 475 confirmedⁱ diphtheria cases have been notified in Australia in 2026, representing a substantial increase compared with historical levels. For the equivalent periods in 2022 to 2025ⁱⁱⁱ, an average of 11 cases were reported (Table 1). The previous peak in annual notifications occurred in 2022, with 31 cases, the majority of which were associated with several clusters in northern Queensland (80.6%; 25/31).

Notifications of diphtheria began increasing in October 2025, with a marked increase from February 2026. Nationally, the number of diphtheria cases diagnosed each week appears to have plateaued between mid-April and early June and has since generally declined; however, there has been variability in trends at the sub-national level (see *Geographic distribution*). In the past fortnight, 24 cases were notified^{iv}, compared with 36 cases in the previous fortnight, with diagnosis dates ranging from 2 July to 20 July 2026. Figure 1 provides an epidemic curve of cases by diagnosis month, noting recent diagnosis date trends are likely incomplete and should be interpreted with caution.

Figure 1: Notifications of diphtheria by month of diagnosis*, Australia, 1 January 2025 to 27 July 2026



* Reporting delays between diagnosis date and notification to the NNDSS particularly in recent weeks, and the incomplete current month affect data completeness. Trends for recent periods should be interpreted with caution.

Species

Under the national case definition for diphtheria, a confirmed case requires isolation of toxigenic *Corynebacterium diphtheriae* or toxigenic *C. ulcerans* from the upper respiratory tract or skin lesionⁱ. Among confirmed cases in 2026 (n=475), almost all were *C. diphtheriae* (99.4%; 472/475), with three *C. ulcerans*^v cases (0.6%; 3/475). All *C. ulcerans* cases were locally acquired, with diagnoses occurring in late March (n=1) and mid-June (n=2).

ⁱⁱⁱ 1 January to 27 July

^{iv} Diagnosis date is the preferred public health indicator of disease transmission activity. However, delays between diagnosis and notification to the NNDSS result in incomplete data for more recent weeks. Notification date can be used as a proxy for more current trends, with an underlying assumption of a stable distribution of reporting lags.

^v *C. ulcerans* is considered a zoonotic infection and is not related to the current outbreak which is caused by *C. diphtheriae*. Historically, *C. ulcerans* has been associated with consumption of raw or unpasteurised milk products or direct contact with infected domestic or farm animals. Australian Centre for Disease Control

Place of acquisition

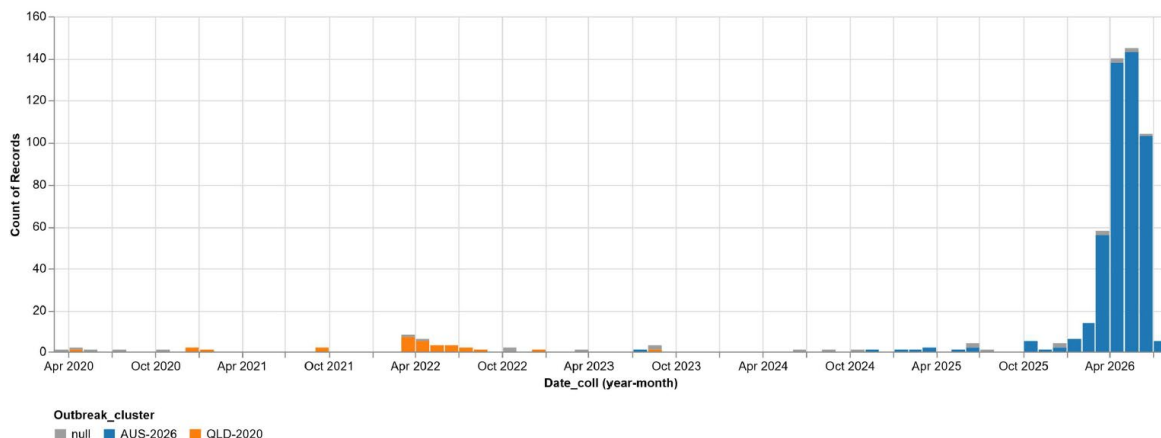
By place of acquisition, between 2014 and 2019, the majority of diphtheria cases were acquired overseas, predominantly in the Western Pacific and South-East Asia regions. Since 2020, the majority of diphtheria notifications have been locally acquired. So far in 2026, 3 cases (0.6%; 3/475) are reported to have acquired their infection overseas.

Since 2020, there have been 16 diphtheria clusters (with 2 or more cases) reported by jurisdictions, with 11 of these clusters reported in 2026. The largest epidemiologically linked clusters (10 to 16 cases) occurred in North Queensland with cases involved in these clusters spanning 2020 to 2023. The more recent clusters in 2026 have been in Western Australia, the Northern Territory and South Australia, with the size of these epidemiologically linked clusters ranging from 2 to 12 cases.

Genomic analysis of *C. diphtheriae* sequences uploaded to AusTrakka, with collection dates from 2025 up to 2 July 2026, suggests that locally acquired cases in WA, the NT, QLD and SA are all closely related and form part of the same outbreak group known as AU-2026^{vi} (Figure 4).

Genomic analyses suggest that AU-2026 is distinct from but likely descended from the same ancestral lineage as the QLD cluster of cases identified between 2020 and 2023 (QLD-2020). This is also consistent with previous findings that the AUS-2026 and QLD-2020 are genetically very similar. However, because not all infections are sampled, and some samples may not have been genome sequenced, definitive epidemiological links cannot be determined from these genomic analyses alone.

Figure 4: AusTrakka* clustering of toxigenic *C. diphtheriae* sequences, 12 March 2020 to 2 July 2026



* AusTrakka Genomic Analysis Report ATOI26001 – *Corynebacterium diphtheriae* (21 July 2026).

Clinical presentation

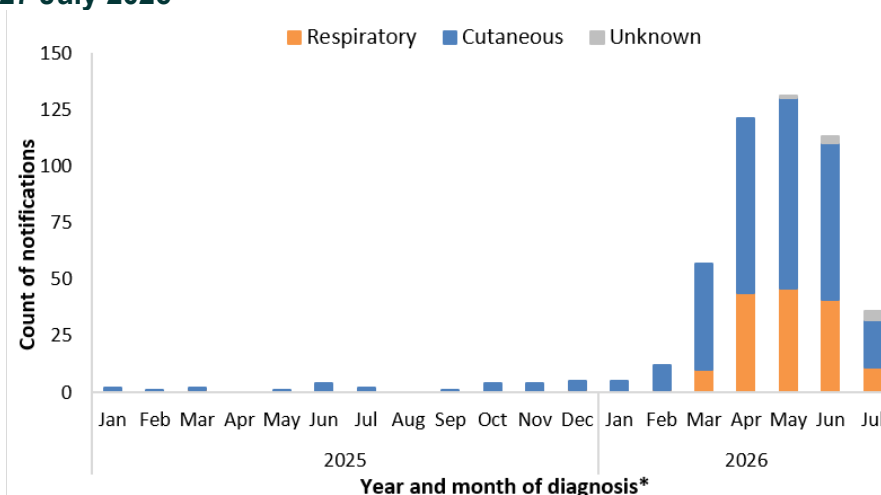
Across Australia, from 2016 to 2025, most diphtheria notifications were reported as cutaneous diphtheria, with only a small number of respiratory diphtheria cases reported annually across most years during this period. The increase and upward trend in locally acquired cutaneous diphtheria cases during the latter part of this period may be attributable to changes in testing practices, including toxigenic testing, particularly of wounds, as well as the inclusion of cutaneous

^{vi} Please note: To account for increasing genomic diversity, AusTrakka has revised its approach to grouping related cases. Rather than relying only on SNP-based clustering, outbreak groups are now determined using a broader assessment of genomic relatedness. The AU-2026 outbreak group includes all samples previously classified as clusters 2:2:2, 2:2:5 and 2:2:3. This is consistent with previous analyses that these cases are genomically linked.

diphtheria in the national case definition from 2017¹. In 2022, respiratory diphtheria accounted for 19.4% (6/31) of cases, with all of these cases locally acquired.

In 2026, the predominant clinical presentation continues to be cutaneous diphtheria (66.1%; 314/475), with respiratory diphtheria accounting for 32.2% (153/475) of cases, and clinical presentation information pending for 8 cases (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Notifications of diphtheria by clinical presentation and month of diagnosis*, Australia, 1 January 2025 to 27 July 2026



* Reporting delays between diagnosis and notification to the NNDSS, particularly in recent weeks, and the incomplete current month affect data completeness. Trends for recent periods should be interpreted with caution.

Age and sex

Since 2014, notifications of diphtheria have predominantly been reported among those aged 25 years and over, with variability in the proportion of cases reported among those in younger age groups since 2017 (Figure 6). The highest number of cases so far in 2026 are among those in the 25 to 44 years age group (Figure 7), with notification rates highest among the 5 to 14 and 15 to 24 years age groups. So far in 2026, by clinical presentation, the median age of cutaneous diphtheria cases (26 years; IQR 11.0-39.75) has been higher compared to respiratory diphtheria cases (17 years; IQR 12.0-27.0), with this pattern consistent with previous years (Figure 7).

Between 2022 and 2025, the distribution of cases by sex was relatively balanced (47.4% females), with some variability by age group. In 2026, a higher proportion of cases overall are among females (54.3%), with variability also observed by age group.

Figure 6: Proportion of diphtheria notifications by age group, Australia, 1 January 2014 to 27 July 2026

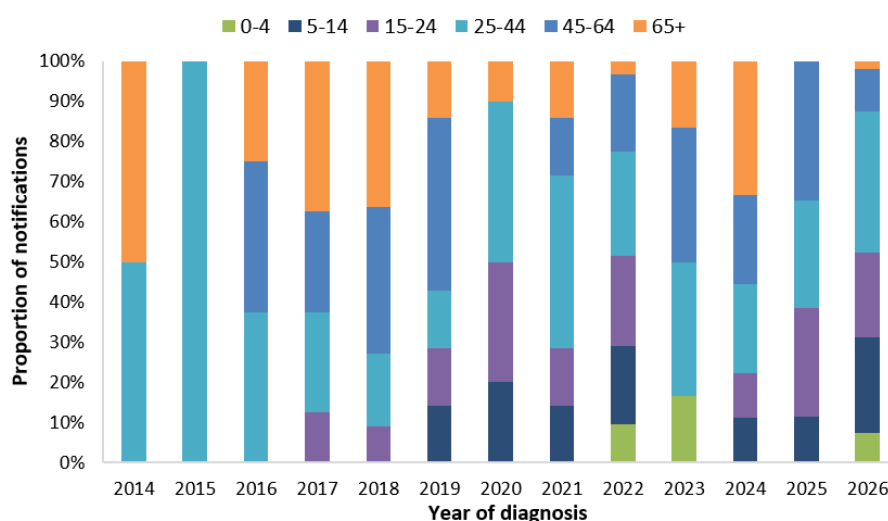
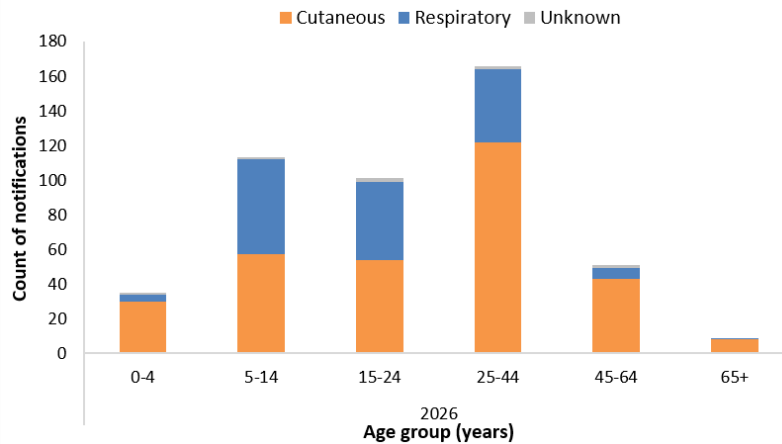


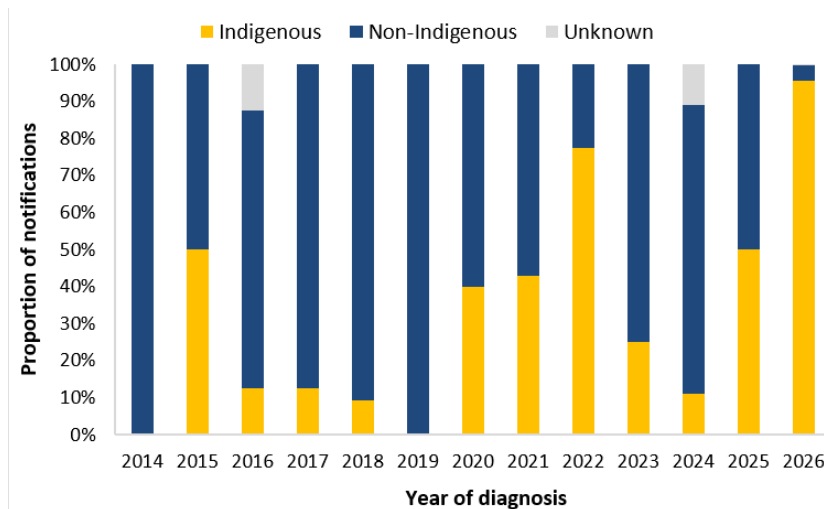
Figure 7: Notifications of diphtheria by age group and clinical presentation, Australia, 1 January to 27 July 2026



Indigenous status

Indigenous status completeness for diphtheria has remained consistently high, at over 99.0% across 2014 to 2026. Between 2014 and 2019, the proportion of diphtheria cases among Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people was around 10.5% of cases, noting that there were very few cases reported in 2014 and 2015 (n=4) (Figure 8). Between 2020 to 2022, which included multiple diphtheria clusters in North Queensland, the proportion of cases among Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people increased to 64.6%. So far in 2026, 95.6% (454/475) of cases have been reported among Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people.

Figure 8: Proportion of diphtheria notifications by Indigenous status, Australia, 1 January 2014 to 27 July 2026



Severity

Between 2022 and 2025, just over a quarter (28.2%) of diphtheria notifications were reported as being hospitalised, with proportions of cases hospitalised higher among those with respiratory diphtheria. So far in 2026, a lower proportion (18.7%; 89/475) of all diphtheria cases have been hospitalised. The proportion of respiratory diphtheria cases hospitalised (19.6%; 30/153) is similar to the proportion among cutaneous diphtheria cases (18.5%; 58/314). While the proportion of cases hospitalised may vary over time and by clinical presentation type due either to true differences in disease severity or differences in the public health management of cases, including for infection control purposes, diphtheria remains a potentially severe disease and can result in serious outcomes, including hospitalisation and death.

In 2026, one death has been reported in a diphtheria case notified in April, with diphtheria indicated as the probable cause. Prior to 2026, the most recent diphtheria associated death was reported in 2018.

Vaccination status

The vaccination status among diphtheria cases has differed by clinical presentation type. In 2026, a higher proportion of respiratory diphtheria cases (86.9%) had received 3 or more valid doses (primary course), compared with 78.0% of cutaneous diphtheria cases.

While vaccination provides strong protection against the severe effects of diphtheria toxin, it does not consistently prevent carriage or transmission of *C. diphtheriae*, regardless of whether the strain produces toxin or not. Consistent with this, hospitalisation was more common among respiratory diphtheria cases with two or fewer recorded vaccine doses (40.0%; 8/20) than among cases who had received three or more doses (15.8%; 21/133). Similarly, among cutaneous cases, the corresponding proportions were 25.0% (17/68) and 14.7% (36/245), respectively.

Consistent with the National Immunisation Program and broader [Australian Immunisation Handbook](#) recommendations, the number of doses received tended to increase with increasing age (Figure 9). In 2026, among diphtheria cases reported to have received at least 3 vaccine doses, the median period since last vaccine dose has typically been lower among cutaneous diphtheria cases (3.6 years) than among respiratory diphtheria cases (7.2 years) (Figure 10). Among respiratory diphtheria cases, the median period since last vaccine dose was very similar among hospitalised cases (7.2 years) and non-hospitalised cases (7.1 years).

More broadly, national diphtheria–tetanus–pertussis (DTP) vaccination coverage rates as at September 2025, based on the [National Immunisation Program Schedule](#), were:

- 93.4% (range: 91.9% to 94.8%) among all children aged 5 years
- 94.7% (range: 92.9% to 96.3%) among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 5 years.

However, ‘fully immunised’ rates among the 5-year-old cohort, regardless of Indigenous status, have been gradually declining since peaking in 2020. For further information on vaccination coverage, including by geographic areas, please refer to the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing [Immunisation dashboards](#).

Figure 9: Notifications of diphtheria by vaccination status, clinical presentation type and age group, Australia, 1 January to 27 July 2026

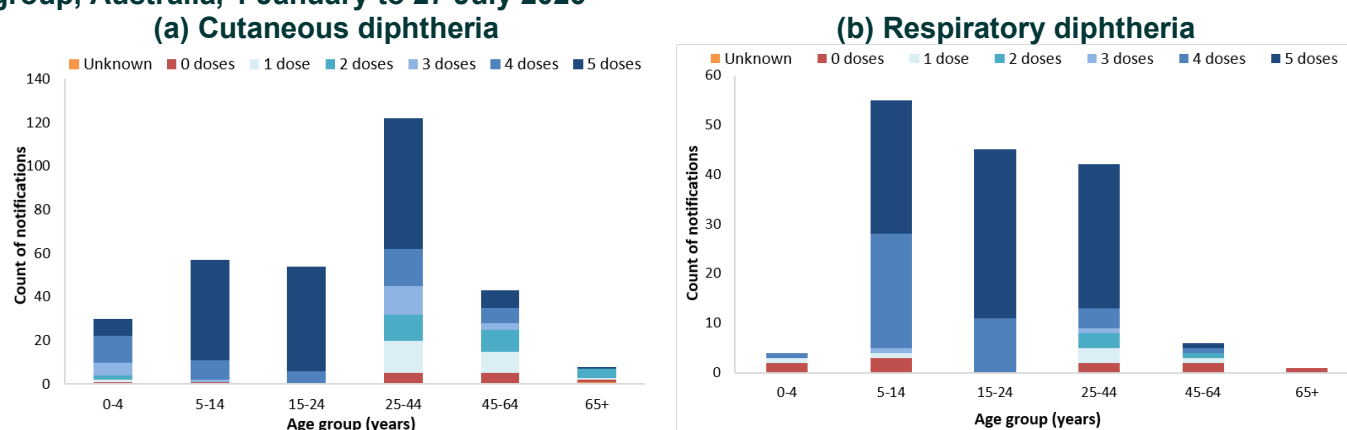
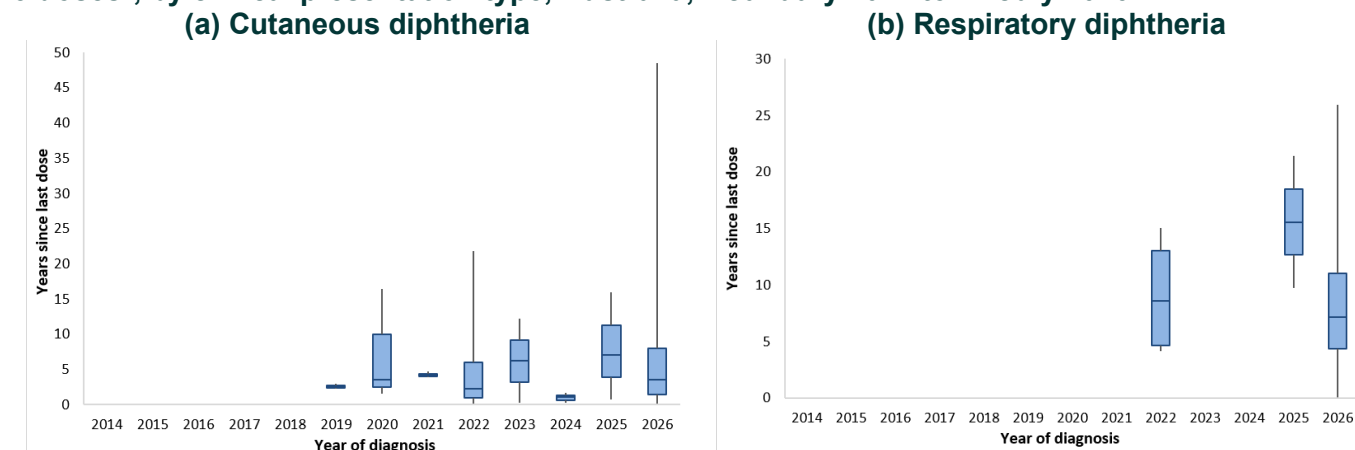


Figure 10: Distribution of years since last vaccine dose for notifications of diphtheria with at least 3 doses*, by clinical presentation type, Australia, 1 January 2014 to 27 July 2026



* Periods where there were less than 2 cases that had received 3 or more vaccine doses are not shown

Epidemiological characteristics of diphtheria cases

Table 1: Epidemiological summary of diphtheria cases* in Australia, 1 January 2022 to 27 July 2026

	Past 4-weeks (30 June to 27 July 2026)*	2026 YTD†	2025	2022–2025 YTD† (mean)	2022–2025 (mean)
Total	38	475	26	11.8	19.5
Confirmation status					
Confirmed	38 (100%)	475 (100%)	26 (100%)	11.8 (100%)	19.5 (100%)
Probable	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0.0 (0%)	0.0 (0%)
Species					
<i>C. diphtheriae</i>	38 (100%)	472 (99%)	23 (88%)	9.5 (81%)	16.3 (83%)
<i>C. ulcerans</i>	0 (0%)	3 (1%)	3 (12%)	2.3 (19%)	3.3 (17%)
State					
ACT	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0.0 (0%)	0.0 (0%)
NSW	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (8%)	1.8 (15%)	2.5 (13%)
NT	20 (53%)	261 (55%)	9 (35%)	0.3 (2%)	2.5 (13%)
QLD	0 (0%)	4 (1%)	9 (35%)	8.5 (72%)	11.5 (59%)
SA	0 (0%)	13 (3%)	2 (8%)	0.5 (4%)	0.5 (3%)
TAS	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0.0 (0%)	0.3 (1%)
VIC	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (4%)	0.0 (0%)	0.5 (3%)
WA	18 (47%)	197 (41%)	3 (12%)	0.8 (6%)	1.8 (9%)
Remoteness area of residence‡					
Major cities	0 (0%)	4 (1%)	6 (23%)	3.0 (26%)	5.3 (27%)
Regional areas‡	3 (8%)	53 (11%)	11 (42%)	6.3 (53%)	9.5 (49%)
Remote areas‡	35 (92%)	417 (88%)	9 (35%)	2.5 (21%)	4.5 (23%)
Unknown	0 (0%)	1 (0%)	0 (0%)	0.0 (0%)	0.3 (1%)
Place of acquisition					
Overseas acquired	0 (0%)	3 (1%)	8 (31%)	2.0 (17%)	5.0 (26%)
Locally acquired	35 (92%)	457 (96%)	17 (65%)	8.3 (70%)	12.5 (64%)
Unknown	3 (8%)	15 (3%)	1 (4%)	1.5 (13%)	2.0 (10%)
Clinical manifestation					
Cutaneous	23 (61%)	314 (66%)	24 (92%)	10.0 (85%)	17.0 (87%)
Respiratory	11 (29%)	153 (32%)	2 (8%)	1.8 (15%)	2.3 (12%)
Unknown	4 (11%)	8 (2%)	0 (0%)	0.0 (0%)	0.3 (1%)
Age (years)					
Median (IQR)	19.0 (11.8–28.8)	23.0 (12.0–35.0)	36.5 (19.8–48.5)	36.5 (26.8–50.2)	39.4 (22.8–52.8)
Age group (years)					
0–4	2 (5%)	35 (7%)	0 (0%)	1.0 (9%)	1.3 (6%)
5–14	10 (26%)	113 (24%)	3 (12%)	2.3 (19%)	2.5 (13%)
15–24	12 (32%)	101 (21%)	7 (27%)	2.3 (19%)	3.8 (19%)
25–44	11 (29%)	166 (35%)	7 (27%)	3.3 (28%)	5.3 (27%)
45–64	3 (8%)	51 (11%)	9 (35%)	2.0 (17%)	5.3 (27%)
65+	0 (0%)	9 (2%)	0 (0%)	1.0 (9%)	1.5 (8%)
Sex					
Male	18 (47%)	217 (46%)	15 (58%)	6.3 (53%)	10.3 (53%)
Female	20 (53%)	258 (54%)	11 (42%)	5.5 (47%)	9.3 (47%)
Indigenous status					
Indigenous	37 (97%)	454 (96%)	13 (50%)	7.3 (62%)	10.3 (53%)
Non-Indigenous	1 (3%)	20 (4%)	13 (50%)	4.3 (36%)	9.0 (46%)
Unknown	0 (0%)	1 (0%)	0 (0%)	0.3 (2%)	0.3 (1%)

	Past 4-weeks (30 June to 27 July 2026)*	2026 YTD†	2025	2022–2025 YTD† (mean)	2022–2025 (mean)
Severity					
Hospitalised	9 (24%)	89 (19%)	10 (38%)	2.5 (21%)	5.5 (28%)
Died	0 (0%)	1§ (0%)	0 (0%)	0.0 (0%)	0.0 (0%)
Vaccination status					
0 doses	1 (3%)	23 (5%)	5 (19%)	2.0 (17%)	3.8 (19%)
1 dose	2 (5%)	35 (7%)	9 (35%)	2.0 (17%)	4.5 (23%)
2 doses	1 (3%)	32 (7%)	2 (8%)	1.0 (9%)	1.8 (9%)
3 doses	0 (0%)	26 (5%)	0 (0%)	1.5 (13%)	1.5 (8%)
4 doses	9 (24%)	94 (20%)	6 (23%)	1.5 (13%)	2.5 (13%)
5 doses	25 (66%)	264 (56%)	4 (15%)	3.5 (30%)	4.8 (24%)
Unknown	0 (0%)	1 (0%)	0 (0%)	0.3 (2%)	0.8 (4%)

* By diagnosis date, noting that data toward the end of the analysis period is likely incomplete.

†YTD represents the year-to-date diagnosis period of 1 January to 27 July.

‡ Remoteness area of residence includes both locally acquired and overseas acquired cases, and is based on the ABS Australian Statistical Geography Standard Remoteness Structure Postal Areas Correspondence. The categories of 'Inner Regional' and 'Outer Regional' have been combined to 'Regional'. The categories of 'Remote' and 'Very Remote' have been combined to 'Remote'.

§ The cause of death indicates that diphtheria was the probable cause.