

## Diphtheria

*Diphtheria is a Class A Disease. Any case must be reported immediately to the state by calling the phone number listed on the website*

### Epidemiology

Diphtheria is an acute bacterial disease caused by *Corynebacterium diphtheria*, which usually affects the tonsils, pharynx, larynx, and nose. These organisms produce a toxin that is responsible for local tissue destruction and the formation of a harmful “pseudomembrane” that can accumulate in the nose and throat.

The use of diphtheria vaccines became widespread in the 1920s and disease rates dropped dramatically. In the 1980s and 1990s, diphtheria was nearly eliminated from industrialized countries. However, there is a continuous risk of the importation of toxigenic *C. diphtheriae* strains from endemic countries. For example, in Sweden in the mid 1980s after 20 years of absence of diphtheria, an outbreak of 80 cases resulted from importation.

While only a handful of cases are reported each year in the U.S., serosurveys indicate that more than 40% of adults lack protective levels of circulating antitoxin. The last case of diphtheria in Louisiana was reported in 1972 (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Diphtheria cases - Louisiana, 1960-1974

