

MEDIA RELEASE
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KZN Health MEC calls for calm, says diphtheria can be prevented through vaccination

KWAZULU-Natal MEC for Health Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo has allayed public fears following reports on the death of a child with diphtheria and the admission into hospital of two others suspected of being infected with the disease.

Dr Dhlomo said that according to the Department's policies, babies are first vaccinated against diphtheria at six weeks. They then receive boosters at eight years of age, and again at 12 years. Adherence to this schedule by parents and caregivers is crucial and would most likely result in life-long immunity against this disease.

Speaking in Durban in reaction to the reports today, Dr Dhlomo said: "I don't want us to press the panic button as if we have an outbreak of diphtheria. I'm saying this because when we followed the cases of the children who have been admitted, we found that one of them does not have a Road To Health Chart, which means we cannot ascertain when last this child was immunized; and the second child who demised at eight years of age was last immunised at 14 weeks. Now this is probably due to absent mothers.

"Diphtheria is a preventable disease. And we really call upon our compatriots to make sure that they adhere to the vaccination schedules that we have for them."

According to the Department, Diphtheria is caused by the bacterium *Corynebacterium diphtheriae*. This germ produces a toxin that can harm or destroy human body tissues and organs. One type of diphtheria affects the throat and sometimes the tonsils. Another type, more common in the tropics, causes ulcers on the skin. Diphtheria affects people of all ages, but most often it strikes unimmunized children.

When diphtheria affects the throat and tonsils, the early symptoms are sore throat, loss of appetite, and slight fever. Within two to three days a bluish-white or grey membrane forms in the throat and on the tonsils. This membrane sticks to the soft palate of the throat and may bleed. If there is bleeding, the membrane may become greyish-green or black.

The patient may either recover at this point or develop severe weakness and die within six to ten days. Patients with severe diphtheria do not develop a high fever but may develop a swollen neck and obstructed airway.

Dr Dhlomo said the last known incidence of diphtheria in South Africa was before 2009, and none of the cases were from KwaZulu-Natal. He emphasized the importance of vaccination, and called upon parents and caregivers to ensure this is done.

"If a child gets vaccinated, they will survive. And they're likely to develop a life-long immunity against this disease. Therefore, I'm calling upon all our mothers, parents and caregivers in the province to really come again into our health facilities Whether you've forgotten or you have no information, we will help you. We'll give them vaccinations or boosters. With these boosters we give a child the strength to survive, because without it, they become susceptible to this disease. And it is a serious condition once you get it. And it can lead to death, especially among babies."

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