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Health checks
Healthy Eating
Nutrition for life
Healthy mind
Healthy pregnancy
Immunisation

Services and support
Aged care services
Alcohol and drug services
LGBTI support
Carers, carers and respite care services
Child, family and relationship services
Disability services
Emergency, crisis and support services
End of life and palliative care services
Hospitals, surgery and procedures
Mental health services
Planning and coordinating healthcare
Pregnancy and birth services

AZ

Conditions and treatments
Healthy living
Services and support
Videos
Service profiles

Blog
Blog authors
Topics

Podcast
Influenza - Dr Brett Sutton & Prof Kanta Subbarao
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Other sites
Health.vic
DHHS
Seniors Online

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Buruli ulcer

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Buruli (also known as Bairnsdale) ulcer is a skin disease caused by the bacterium Mycobacterium ulcerans. The toxins made by the bacterium destroy skin cells, small blood vessels and the fat under the skin, which causes ulceration and skin loss. Since the ulcer gets bigger with time, early diagnosis and prompt treatment can minimise skin loss.

These bacteria are found naturally in the environment – for example, they have been detected in mosquitoes, vegetation and possum poo from some possum species in areas where there are cases of Buruli ulcer.

It is not known how humans become infected, although it is thought that mosquitoes may have a role in transmitting the infection. Buruli ulcer is not thought to be transmitted person-to-person.

The number of cases in Victoria varies widely from year to year, but numbers have been increasing each year from 2013.

**Symptoms of Buruli ulcer**

The progression of symptoms can include:

- A spot that looks like a mosquito or spider bite forms on the skin (most commonly on the limbs).
- The spot grows bigger over days or weeks.
- The spot may form a crusty, non-healing scab.
- The scab then disintegrates into an ulcer.
- The ulcer continues to enlarge.
- Unlike other ulcers, this ulcer is usually painless and there is generally no fever or other signs of infection.
- The infection may sometimes present with no ulceration but with localised pain, swelling and fever, raised lumps, or thickened or raised flat areas of skin.

**Locations of Buruli ulcer outbreaks**

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Buruli ulcer has been reported in 33 countries around the world. Affected areas include rural West Africa, Central Africa, New Guinea, Latin America and tropical regions of Asia.

In Australia, Buruli ulcer most commonly occurs in localised coastal areas of Victoria.

Buruli ulcer was first diagnosed in the Bairnsdale area in the 1930s. Since then a growing number of cases have been reported in the Bellarine Peninsula and, since 2012, the Mornington Peninsula.

There are three recognised levels of risk in the areas where Buruli ulcer is endemic (constantly present in the community) in Victoria:

- The highest risk is associated with the active transmission areas of Rye, Sorrento, Blairgowrie and Tootgarook on the Mornington Peninsula.
- There is a moderate risk associated with areas in the Bellarine Peninsula (Ocean Grove, Barwon Heads, Point Lonsdale, Queenscliff), and the Frankston and Seaford areas.
- There is a low but material risk associated with the rest of the Bellarine and Mornington Peninsula, the South Eastern Bayside suburbs and East Gippsland.

Diagnosis of Buruli ulcer
Buruli ulcer is usually diagnosed by a doctor, based on:
- medical history
- travel history – if you have travelled to an area associated with Buruli ulcer
- physical examination – to identify a slowly enlarging, painless ulcer
- swabs or biopsy taken from the ulcer, which are tested in a laboratory.

Treatment for Buruli ulcer
Most Buruli ulcers can be treated with a course of specific oral antibiotics. Surgery is sometimes used in combination with antibiotic therapy. If surgery is required, a small amount of surrounding healthy tissue is also cut out to make sure the infection is completely removed. Depending on the extent of surgery, skin grafts may be needed to close the wound.

Sometimes the ulcer can return after surgery, requiring another course of antibiotics or an operation (or both).

As the ulcer gets bigger with time, early diagnosis and prompt treatment can minimise skin loss.

Prevention of Buruli ulcer
Although the exact cause of infection in humans is not known, it makes sense to protect yourself from potential sources of infection such as soil and insect bites.

Suggestions to reduce the risk of infection include:
- Wear gardening gloves, long-sleeved shirts and trousers when working outdoors.
- Avoid insect bites by using suitable insect repellents.
- Protect cuts or abrasions with sticking plasters.
- Promptly wash and cover any scratches or cuts you receive while working outdoors.
- See your doctor if you have a slow-healing skin lesion.

It is important to remember that the risk of infection is low, even in those areas where the infection is endemic (constantly present in the community).

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
Where to get help

- Your GP (doctor)
- Infectious disease physician
- Dermatologist

References

- *Buruli ulcer*, World Health Organization.
- *Buruli ulcer (Mycobacterium ulcerans infection)*, 2018, World Health Organization.

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More information

Immunisation

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Immunisation basics
- Timing and schedules
- Immunisation throughout life
- Common concerns about immunisation
- Travel and immunisation
- A-Z of immunisations and vaccines

Immunisation basics

- Why immunisation is important
  Immunisation saves lives. It protects you, your family and your community. And it also helps protect future generations by eradicating diseases.
- Immunisation – deciding which vaccines you need
  Everyone's immunisation needs are different and are influenced by your health, lifestyle, age and occupation.
- Pre-immunisation checklist
  This immunisation checklist will help you prepare so you know what to expect and what information you will need to give your GP or clinic staff before your immunisation.
- Dr Margaret's Story (video)
  Access to vaccines has changed lives and protects our children from crippling diseases such as polio.
- Fight flu this winter
  Fight flu this winter. Protect yourself – get vaccinated.
- Immune system explained
  The immune system remembers every germ it has ever overcome.
- Immunisation – common questions
  We answer some common questions about immunisation, including how immunisation works, why it's important and where you can be immunised.
- Immunisations - vaccinations in Victoria, Australia (video)
  Vaccinations are encouraged for all individuals living in the state of Victoria, Australia. The immunisation program in Victoria may be different than other countries, and individuals who have moved.
- Infections – bacterial and viral
  Many bacterial infections can be treated with antibiotics, but they are useless against viral infections.
- No Jab No Play
  No Jab No Play – from 1 January 2016, all parents/guardians seeking to enrol their child at an early childhood service in Victoria must provide evidence that the child is fully immunised for their age.
- Ros' Story (video)
  Talk to a qualified medical expert like your doctor to find out more about immunisation.
- Vaccines
  Vaccines trick the body into building immunity against infectious diseases without causing the actual disease.

Timing and schedules

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
• Childhood immunisation
  Being immunised from an early age helps protect your child against serious childhood infections.

• Immunisation in secondary schools
  Some immunisations are recommended for all Australian teenagers.

• Immunisation history statements for children
  By law, parents or guardians must provide an Immunisation History Statement when enrolling children in any childcare service, kindergarten or primary school in Victoria.

• No Jab No Play
  No Jab No Play - from 1 January 2016, all parents/guardians seeking to enrol their child at an early childhood service in Victoria must provide evidence that the child is fully immunised for their age.

• 10 tips for secondary students on how to deal with immunisation
  10 tips for secondary students on how to deal with immunisation.

• Fight flu this winter
  Fight flu this winter. Protect yourself – get vaccinated.

• How to find your vaccination records
  If you've recently arrived in Australia or missed out on an immunisation for any reason, you may need catch-up doses.

• Immunisation – common questions
  We answer some common questions about immunisation, including how immunisation works, why it's important and where you can be immunised.

• Immunisations – catch-ups and boosters
  If you've recently arrived in Australia or missed out on an immunisation for any reason, you may need catch-up doses.

• Immunisations for older people
  Immunisations are important for you as you get older, because your immune system can become less effective at protecting you from some diseases.

• My Health, Learning and Development book
  My Health and Development Record is designed for parents to keep and record their child's milestones, health, growth, development and immunisations.

• Pre-immunisation checklist
  This immunisation checklist will help you prepare so you know what to expect and what information you will need to give your GP or clinic staff before your immunisation.

• Recent arrivals, asylum seekers and family support services
  Provides an overview of family support programs and health services available to refugees and asylum seekers living in Victoria.

• Who provides immunisations in Victoria
  Immunisations in Victoria are provided by local councils, GPs and specially qualified nurses in medical clinics and community health services, some Maternal and Child Health nurses, travel clinics and...

Immunisation throughout life

• 10 tips for secondary students on how to deal with immunisation
  10 tips for secondary students on how to deal with immunisation.

• Fight flu this winter
  Fight flu this winter. Protect yourself – get vaccinated.

• Flu (influenza) – immunisation
  Influenza immunisation is recommended for people in known high risk groups.

• How to find your vaccination records
  If you've recently arrived in Australia or missed out on an immunisation for any reason, you may need catch-up doses.

• Immunisation and pregnancy
  Immunisation can protect a woman and her unborn baby against many infectious diseases.

• Immunisation – common questions

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
We answer some common questions about immunisation, including how immunisation works, why it's important and where you can be immunised.

- **Immunisation – deciding which vaccines you need**
  Everyone's immunisation needs are different and are influenced by your health, lifestyle, age and occupation.

- **Immunisation – DTP, polio, hep B and Hib**
  A number of combined immunisations against diphtheria, tetanus and other infectious diseases are available to provide protection at various life stages.

- **Immunisation history statements for children**
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- **Immunisations – catch-ups and boosters**
  If you've recently arrived in Australia or missed out on an immunisation for any reason, you may need catch-up doses.

- **Immunisations for older people**
  Immunisations are important for you as you get older, because your immune system can become less effective at protecting you from some diseases.

- **Immunisations for work**
  Some jobs have a higher risk of exposure to infectious diseases, so if your job is one of these, it’s a good idea to check your immunisation status.

- **Melissa's story (video)**
  Melissa shares her story of how her baby caught chickenpox at 5 weeks old.

- **No Jab No Play**
  No Jab No Play – from 1 January 2016, all parents/guardians seeking to enrol their child at an early childhood service in Victoria must provide evidence that the child is fully immunised for their age.

- **Pre-immunisation checklist**
  This immunisation checklist will help you prepare so you know what to expect and what information you will need to give your GP or clinic staff before your immunisation.

- **Recent arrivals, asylum seekers and family support services**
  Provides an overview of family support programs and health services available to refugees and asylum seekers living in Victoria.

- **Why immunisation is important**
  Immunisation saves lives. It protects you, your family and your community. And it also helps protect future generations by eradicating diseases.

**Common concerns about immunisation**

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- **Pre-immunisation checklist**
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- **Immunisation – side effects**
  Find out more about possible side effects of immunisation.

- **Immunisations for older people**
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- **Immunisation – common questions**
  We answer some common questions about immunisation, including how immunisation works, why it's important and where you can be immunised.

**Travel and immunisation**

- **Diphtheria**
  Diphtheria is a serious bacterial disease that causes severe inflammation of the nose, throat and windpipe.

- **Flu (influenza) – immunisation**
  Influenza immunisation is recommended for people in known high risk groups.

- **Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib) immunisation**

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The National Immunisation Program provides children with free immunisation against Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib) and meningococcal group C disease.

- **Hepatitis A**
  Immunisation is the best protection against hepatitis A infection and it is recommended for people in high-risk groups.

- **Hepatitis B** – immunisation
  Immunisation against hepatitis B reduces the risk of infection in babies.

- **Human papillomavirus (HPV)** – immunisation
  The human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine helps prevent infection with HPV that causes cervical cancer.

- **Immunisation – deciding which vaccines you need**
  Everyone's immunisation needs are different and are influenced by your health, lifestyle, age and occupation.

- **Immunisation – DTP, polio, hep B and Hib**
  A number of combined immunisations against diphtheria, tetanus and other infectious diseases are available to provide protection at various life stages.

- **Infections – bacterial and viral**
  Many bacterial infections can be treated with antibiotics, but they are useless against viral infections.

- **Measles**
  Measles can cause serious and sometimes fatal complications, including pneumonia and brain inflammation.

A-Z of immunisations and vaccines

- **Pre-immunisation checklist**
  This immunisation checklist will help you prepare so you know what to expect and what information you will need to give your GP or clinic staff before your immunisation.

- **Australian bat lyssavirus (ABLV)**
  The simplest form of prevention for lyssavirus is to avoid close contact with bats.

- **Caitlin and Liam's story (video)**
  Find out how important you and your child's immunisation is to the most vulnerable members in our community.

- **Chickenpox – immunisation**
  Immunisation against chickenpox can protect your child from getting chickenpox and from the possible serious complications of chickenpox.

- **Diphtheria**
  Diphtheria is a serious bacterial disease that causes severe inflammation of the nose, throat and windpipe.

- **Dr Margaret’s Story (video)**
  Access to vaccines has changed lives and protects our children from crippling diseases such as polio.

- **Dr Marion Duschin (video)**
  Can a child's immune system be overloaded by immunisations? The answer is no. Talk to a qualified medical expert like your doctor to find out more about immunisation.

- **Fight flu this winter**
  Fight flu this winter. Protect yourself – get vaccinated.

- **Flu (influenza) – immunisation**
  Influenza immunisation is recommended for people in known high-risk groups.

- **Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib)**
  Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib) is a bacterium that causes a life-threatening infection that can lead to serious illness, especially in children.

- **Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib) immunisation**
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Leptospirosis
Leptospirosis is a disease spread from animals to humans, caused by infection with the bacteria Leptospira.

Measles
Measles can cause serious and sometimes fatal complications, including pneumonia and brain inflammation.

Measles, mumps, rubella, varicella (chickenpox) – immunisation
Immunisation is the best protection against measles, mumps, rubella and varicella (chickenpox).

Meningococcal disease – immunisation
Meningococcal group vaccines provide good protection against meningococcal group diseases.

Mumps
Mumps is a viral illness that causes fever and swollen salivary glands, and a swollen face.

Meningococcal disease – immunisation
Immunisation can substantially reduce the risk of pneumococcal disease, especially in young children.

Poli – immunisation
You need several doses of the vaccine before you are fully protected against polio.

Rotavirus
Rotavirus is a common cause of viral gastroenteritis for Australian babies and preschool children.

Rotavirus – immunisation
Children need several doses of the vaccine to reduce the risk of rotavirus.

Smallpox
Smallpox was once a feared and highly contagious viral disease.

Tetanus
Tetanus is a life-threatening disease and immunisation is the best way to reduce your risk.

Time to immunise - free vaccines for men who have sex with men
Immunisation is one of the best ways you can protect yourself and others from infectious diseases in our community. In partnership with Thorne Harbour Health (formerly Victorian AIDS Council, Inc).

Travel health - yellow fever immunisation
If you are travelling or passing through areas infected with yellow fever, some countries require you to be vaccinated.

Tuberculosis (TB)
Tuberculosis is spread when a person with an active infection coughs, laughs, sings or sneezes.

Typhoid and paratyphoid
Almost every Australian case of typhoid or paratyphoid fever is caught overseas.

Whooping cough
The major symptom of whooping cough is a severe cough, which is often followed by a 'whooping' sound.
Whooping cough – a family’s experience (video)

A family shares their experience when their baby daughter contracted whooping cough (or pertussis).

Why immunisation is important

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Related Information

- Bird flu (avian influenza)
  The symptoms of bird flu in humans are similar to those of regular influenza.
- Flu (influenza)
  Influenza (the flu) is caused by a virus. The flu is more than just a bad cold and can occasionally lead to serious complications, including death. Specific antiviral medication is available. It is...
- Boils
  Some areas of the body are more susceptible to boils, including the face, throat, armpits, groin and buttocks.
- Cellulitis
  Cellulitis is a bacterial infection of the skin that occurs most commonly on the lower legs and in areas where the skin is damaged or inflamed.
- Warts
  Warts can be stubborn, so you may need to use more than one type of treatment.

Home

Related information on other websites

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Content Partner

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