

Diphtheria - Factsheet

What is diphtheria?

Diphtheria is a disease caused by bacteria. Some kinds of diphtheria bacteria produce dangerous toxins that affect the tonsils, throat, nose, and sometimes skin. Thanks to vaccination efforts, this disease is rarer in the United States.

What are the symptoms of diphtheria?

Symptoms usually appear 2-5 days after exposure. There are two types of diphtheria. The first type is called **respiratory diphtheria** and affects the nose and throat. Symptoms may include sore throat, low-grade fever, and neck swelling. A gray membrane may also form across the throat. The second type is called **cutaneous diphtheria** which involves the skin. Skin lesions may be painful, swollen, and reddened. Sometimes, a person with diphtheria may have no symptoms.

How is diphtheria spread?

Diphtheria is spread from person-to-person through close contact with discharges from an infected person's nose, throat, eyes, or skin lesions.

How long are people contagious?

People are usually no longer contagious 48 hours after they have begun appropriate antibiotic treatment. Untreated people who are infected with diphtheria bacteria can be contagious for 2-6 weeks and rarely, more than six months.

Who gets diphtheria?

Diphtheria is a rare disease. Those most at risk are unvaccinated persons living in crowded conditions or environments.

What treatment is available for people with diphtheria?

A health care provider may decide to use antitoxin in some situations. Antibiotics, such as penicillin and erythromycin, may also be prescribed for the treatment of diphtheria.

Do infected people need to be kept home from school, work or childcare?

Persons with diphtheria will need to be kept home until public health recommendations approve their return to work, school or childcare.

How can I protect myself and my family from getting diphtheria?

- Keep up to date on immunizations. Diphtheria toxoid is combined with tetanus toxoid and pertussis vaccine to form a triple vaccine known as DTaP. This vaccine should be given at 2, 4, 6, and 12-15 months of age, and between 4-6 years of age. Adolescents and adults should receive a tetanus and diphtheria (Td) vaccine or a tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis (Tdap) vaccine every 10 years to maintain immunity.

- Anyone who has close contact with a person infected with diphtheria will be tested for the disease and given an antibiotic and vaccine. Close contacts may also be kept out of school, childcare, or work until they have recovered from the disease.