

Diphtheria

What is diphtheria?

Diphtheria is a bacterial disease that causes inflammation of the throat, nose and tonsils, as well as high fever. It can interfere with swallowing and may cause suffocation. The bacteria may also produce toxins that circulate through the blood, damaging the heart, kidneys, and nervous system. Diphtheria was once a major cause of death among children but has been managed through vaccination.

Who gets diphtheria?

In recent years, cases are more common among people of all age groups that are unvaccinated or not full vaccinated.

How is diphtheria spread?

Diphtheria is spread from person to person, usually through nose and throat droplets, from coughing or sneezing. Spreading can happen from skin blisters, like an abnormal sore, or clothes that are contaminated with discharges from blisters on an infected person. A person can also get infected with diphtheria by touching an object, like a toy, that has been contaminated with the bacteria that cause diphtheria.

What are the symptoms of diphtheria?

When the bacteria that cause diphtheria invade the nose and throat, they produce a poison (toxin) that can cause weakness, sore throat, fever, and swollen glands in the neck. Within two to three days, a thick coating can build up in the throat or nose, making it very hard to breathe and swallow. This thick gray coating is called a “pseudomembrane” and it can build up over the nasal tissues, tonsils, voice box, and throat. The pseudomembrane is formed from dead tissue caused by the toxin that is produced by the bacteria. The pseudomembrane sticks to the tissue below and may get in the way of breathing. Damage to the heart, kidneys and nerves can also happen.

How long is an infected person able to spread diphtheria?

An infected person can usually spread diphtheria for 2 to 4 weeks after symptoms develop. The rare chronic carrier (a person with continual infection) may be infectious for 6 months or longer. Treatment with antibiotics will prevent an infected person from spreading diphtheria.

What is the treatment for diphtheria?

Antibiotics and antitoxin are used to treat diphtheria along with breathing treatments.

Should persons who have been around a person infected with diphtheria be treated?

People who live in the same household as a person with diphtheria and people who have close, personal contact with a diphtheria patient will be notified by a county health department public health nurse and recommended to receive antibiotics to prevent them from becoming ill. Public health officials may also advise exposed people to be tested for diphtheria and examined every day for seven days for signs of the disease. Also, some may need to be immunized with diphtheria vaccine.

How can diphtheria be prevented?



The main way that diphtheria is prevented is by receiving DTaP vaccination (diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis). The shot series starts with the first dose at 2 months of age and ends with a booster dose given before age seven with a total of five doses. Adults should receive a booster dose of Td (tetanus, diphtheria) every ten years.