

Diphtheria - Factsheet

What is diphtheria?

Diphtheria is a disease caused by bacteria. These bacteria release toxins that generally affect the tonsils, throat, or nose. The bacteria can also affect skin. This disease is rare in the United States.

What are the symptoms of diphtheria?

Symptoms usually appear 2 to 5 days after exposure. There are two types of diphtheria. One 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 form across the throat. The second kind, cutaneous diphtheria, involves the skin. Skin lesions may be painful, swollen and reddened. Sometimes, a person with diphtheria has 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 the diphtheria bacteria can be contagious for 2-6 weeks and rarely, more than six months.

Who gets diphtheria?

Diphtheria is a rare disease. It is most likely to happen when unvaccinated people live in crowded conditions.

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 be prescribed for the treatment of diphtheria.

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

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

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

- Keep up to date on immunizations. Diphtheria toxoid is usually 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 and 6 years of age. Everyone should also receive a combination of tetanus and diphtheria toxoids (Td) or tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis toxoids (Tdap) every 10 years to maintain immunity.
- Anyone who has close contact with a person with diphtheria will be tested for the disease and given an antibiotic and an immunization. Close contacts may also be kept out of school, daycare, or work until they are free of the disease.