

DIPHTHERIA FACT SHEET

What is diphtheria?

Diphtheria is an infection caused by the bacterium *Corynebacterium diphtheriae*. The bacteria get into and attach to the lining of the nose, throat, windpipe and lungs (respiratory system) and produce a poison (toxin). Before there was treatment, it was a major cause of illness and death among children.

Who can get diphtheria?

Diphtheria is a rare disease in industrialized countries, such as the United States. Most cases occur in persons who have not received the vaccine or who have not been completely vaccinated. Diphtheria continues to occur in other parts of the world, particularly in tropical countries.

What are the symptoms of diphtheria?

Symptoms of diphtheria include weakness, sore throat, fever and swollen glands in the neck. The poison destroys healthy tissues in the respiratory system. Within two to three days, the dead tissue forms a thick, gray coating that can build up in the throat or nose. This thick gray coating is called a "pseudomembrane." It can cover tissues in the nose, tonsils, voice box, and throat, making it very hard to breathe and swallow. The poison may also get into the blood stream and cause damage to the heart, kidneys, and nerves.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually begin two to five days after exposure to the bacteria.

How is diphtheria spread?

Diphtheria is spread from person to person, usually through an infected person's respiratory droplets.

Respiratory droplets are produced through coughing or sneezing. Rarely, people can get sick from touching open sores (skin lesions) or clothes that touched open sores of someone sick with diphtheria. A person can also get diphtheria by coming in contact with an object, like a toy, that has the bacteria that cause diphtheria on it.

Is there a vaccine for diphtheria?

Yes, there are four vaccines used to prevent diphtheria, including DTaP, Tdap, DT and Td. Two of these (DTaP and DT) are given to children younger than seven years old, while Tdap and Td are given to older children and adults.

How is diphtheria treated?

Diphtheria is treated using diphtheria antitoxin to stop the poison produced by the bacteria from damaging the body and antibiotics to kill and get rid of the bacteria. Diphtheria patients are usually kept in isolation until they are no longer contagious. This usually takes about 48 hours after starting antibiotics. Even with treatment, about one out of 10 patients with diphtheria die.

How can people protect themselves against diphtheria?

The best way to protect against diphtheria is to get vaccinated.

Where can I get more information?

Information about diphtheria and other related health topics can be found at www.cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please visit www.doh.dc.gov or call (202) 442-9371.