



Diphtheria Fact Sheet

What is diphtheria?

Diphtheria is a highly infectious disease caused by the bacterium *Corynebacterium diphtheriae*. Diphtheria causes inflammation of the throat, nose and tonsils, and a high fever. It can interfere with swallowing and even cause the patient to suffocate in severe cases. The infection may also produce poisons that circulate in the blood and do damage to the heart, kidneys, and nervous system. About 1 out of every 10 people infected with diphtheria dies.

Who gets diphtheria?

In the past, children under 15 years of age who had not been immunized were the most likely to get diphtheria. In recent years, unimmunized adults are more likely to become infected.

How is diphtheria spread?

Diphtheria spreads from person to person, usually through respiratory droplets, like from coughing or sneezing. Rarely, diphtheria is spread by contact with articles soiled with fluid from skin sores of an infected person. A person also can become infected by encountering an object, like a toy, that has diphtheria on it.

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Diphtheria Fact Sheet

What are the symptoms of diphtheria?

The symptoms of diphtheria vary depending on what part of the body is infected. The most common infection occurs in the throat and tonsils causing symptoms ranging from a slight fever, chills, and sore throat to a severe feeling of general illness. Other symptoms which might occur include hoarseness, barking cough, runny nose, scaly rash and open skin sores.

How long is an infected person able to spread diphtheria?

Usually an infected person is able to 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.

Can a person get diphtheria again?

Yes, one attack of diphtheria does not always provide (life time) protection.

What is the treatment for diphtheria?

Antibiotics and antitoxin are used to treat diphtheria. The patient may also need help in breathing. Often the patient should be isolated.

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Should people 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, habitual contact with a diphtheria patient should receive treatment. These people should be tested for diphtheria and examined every day for 7 days for signs of the disease. Also, these people should receive an antibiotic and some may need to be immunized with diphtheria vaccine.

How can the spread of diphtheria be stopped?

The best way to stop diphtheria is to immunize all children with a series of 4 doses of DTaP (diphtheria, tetanus, acellular pertussis) vaccine, beginning at 2 months of age. Adults should receive a booster dose of Td (tetanus, diphtheria) every 10 years.

Does diphtheria vaccine cause reactions?

After a person receives a vaccine containing diphtheria vaccine they might experience some redness and soreness at the site of injection.

Where can a person receive diphtheria vaccine?

Children and adults may receive diphtheria vaccine at county health departments throughout Oklahoma or by checking with their private physician.

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For further information, contact the
Oklahoma City-County Health
Department (405) 425-4437

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