



# DIPHTHERIA

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## **What is diphtheria?**

Diphtheria is a highly infectious disease caused by a bacterium. 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. The germ may also produce toxins that circulate in the blood and do damage to the heart, kidneys, and nervous system.

## **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, adults who have not been recently immunized have also gotten diphtheria.

## **How is diphtheria spread?**

Diphtheria is spread in the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Rarely, diphtheria is spread by contact with skin lesions.

## **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 from a slight fever, chills, and sore throat to a severe feeling of general illness. Other symptoms that 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. Rarely, a person 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. The patient might need help breathing.

## **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 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 diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis (DTaP) vaccine beginning at 2 months of age. Adults should receive a booster dose of Td (tetanus, diphtheria) every 10 years.

## **Where can a person receive diphtheria vaccine?**

Diphtheria vaccine is available at the health department or at a doctor's office.