

Diphtheria

What is diphtheria?

Diphtheria is caused by toxin-producing bacteria. It can cause respiratory illness or a skin infection.

What are the symptoms of diphtheria?

The symptoms of respiratory disease are sore throat, low-grade fever, chills, and a grayish membrane in the throat or tonsil area. In severe cases, there can also be swelling of the neck. Usually symptoms appear 2-5 days after exposure, but occasionally longer. Without antibiotic treatment, the person is contagious for 2 weeks or less, but sometimes up to 4 weeks.

Skin infections may look like a scaling rash or ulcers with clearly defined edges and membrane.

How is diphtheria spread?

The bacteria are spread to others by coughing or sneezing. It can also be spread by contact with wound secretions of an individual with skin infection, though this is very rare.

How common is diphtheria?

The occurrence of diphtheria has become uncommon in the United States since vaccination efforts began in the 1920's and 1930's. The United States has only had 10 confirmed cases since 2001. Most cases since 1970 have occurred in people over the age of 15 years, largely due to lack of continued immunization as adults. Diphtheria continues to occur in developing countries.

What is the treatment for diphtheria?

Diphtheria cases are treated with an antitoxin that is controlled by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Antitoxin will not treat the toxin already bound to tissues, but it will neutralize circulating toxin and prevent progression of the disease. Antibiotic treatment is also given. The disease is usually not contagious 48 hours after antibiotics are started.

Are there complications from diphtheria?

If diphtheria is not properly diagnosed and treated, it can cause serious complications such as heart failure and paralysis. Airway obstruction can also occur. About 1 out of 10 people who get diphtheria dies. In children younger than 5 years, as many as 1 out of 5 children who get diphtheria dies.

Complications and deaths are much less frequent in cases of diphtheria infections in the skin.

Calhoun County Public Health Department

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How can diphtheria be prevented?

The best prevention is to receive the vaccine, which will create immunity to the toxin that causes the illness. Children should finish their primary series of DTaP (diphtheria, pertussis, and tetanus), which consists of five doses. Children should get a booster vaccine called Tdap (which protects against tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis) once at 11 or 12 years of age. Adults should have a Td (tetanus and diphtheria) booster every ten years. In the case of a major or contaminated wound, if it has been longer than five years, a Td booster should be given to provide protection against tetanus. Adults should also receive a one-time shot of the Tdap vaccine in place of one Td shot.

How do I get more information on diphtheria?

Calhoun County Public Health Department
Phone: (269) 969-6383

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Web Site: <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/diphtheria/default.htm>
Phone: 800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636)

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This fact sheet is meant to provide general health information and is not intended to be medical advice or otherwise take the place of your doctor's orders or to diagnose your specific health problems. Check with your doctor if you have any questions or concerns about your health.

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