

Diphtheria

FACTSHEET

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What is Diphtheria?

Diphtheria is an acute bacterial disease that occurs in two forms. Respiratory diphtheria affects the tonsils, throat, and nose. Diphtheria involving the skin is known as cutaneous diphtheria.

Who gets Diphtheria?

Before vaccinations were available, children were at highest risk for respiratory diphtheria. Recently, diphtheria has primarily affected adults not previously vaccinated. Respiratory diphtheria has become a rare disease in the United States.

What are the symptoms of Diphtheria?

The symptoms of respiratory diphtheria include sore throat, low-grade fever and enlarged painful lymph nodes located in the neck. There may be a pinkish colored discharge from the nose. Symptoms of diphtheria involving the skin, or cutaneous diphtheria, include swollen, tender reddened skin lesions.

How is Diphtheria spread?

Diphtheria is spread to others through close contact with the secretions from an infected persons nose, throat, skin, eyes, or skin lesions.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The symptoms usually occur two to five days after infection.

Is a person with Diphtheria contagious?

Yes, a person with Diphtheria is contagious. A person who is being treated with appropriate

antibiotics is contagious for a short period of time, less than four days. A person who has not been treated with appropriate antibiotics can be contagious for up to two weeks, but rarely more than four.

Is there a vaccine for Diphtheria?

A vaccine is available to protect people from diphtheria. The diphtheria vaccine is usually combined with the Tetanus and Pertussis vaccine known as DPT or DPaT. The vaccine should be administered at two, four, six, and fifteen months of age, and between four and six years of age. A combination of tetanus and diphtheria (Td) vaccine should be given every ten years to maintain immunity or protection.

How is Diphtheria treated?

Diphtheria is treated with antibiotics. Additionally, diphtheria antitoxin should be administered after appropriate bacterial cultures have been obtained.

How can Diphtheria be prevented?

The single most important preventive measure for diphtheria is vaccination.

Want more information?

Information about Diphtheria and other related health topics can be found at the website www.cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please call 202-442-9371.

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