

## Diphtheria



What is Diphtheria?

Diphtheria is an upper respiratory tract illness caused by a bacterium that produces a toxin that is carried to the bloodstream. It is very contagious and can be life-threatening if not medically treated.

The respiratory tract is most commonly affected by diphtheria. The toxin can lead to a thick coating (usually fuzzy gray or black) in the nose, throat, and/or airway making it difficult to breath and swallow.

If the disease progresses, it can damage the heart (its ability to pump), the kidneys (their ability to clear waste), and cause nerve damage eventually leading to paralysis.

History.

In the 1920's, before the introduction of the vaccine, there were approximately 100,000-200,000 cases of diphtheria per year in the United States, causing 13,000-15,000 deaths. Children represented the majority of fatalities in these cases.

Signs and Symptoms.

Signs any symptoms of diphtheria are gradual and usually include a sore throat, a low-grade fever, difficulty swallowing, loss of appetite, and neck swelling may be present.

Transmission.

Diphtheria is easily spread from one person to another by direct physical contact, airborne transmission (sneezing, coughing, laughing), or even coming in contact with tissues and drinking glasses of infected individuals.

Treatment.

Treatment is available for diphtheria, but delaying medical action increases mortality rates. A diphtheria anti-toxin is available only in the United States and is administered along with antibiotics to prevent transmission to others. If the disease is advanced, a ventilator or tracheotomy (incision through the neck into the trachea) may be required to assist breathing.

Diphtheria Today.

Today there are approximately 0-5 cases of diphtheria per year in the United States. Preventing diphtheria depends almost completely on immunizing children with the diphtheria/tetanus/pertussis (DTaP) vaccine. Most cases of diphtheria occur in people who have not received the entire course of the vaccine or have not received the vaccine at all. Diphtheria booster shots should be received every ten years to provide continued protection. Routine vaccination of both children and adults is essential to prevent the re-emergence of diphtheria in the United States.

Below is a link to the recommended series of the DTaP vaccine.