

Diphtheria

What is diphtheria?

Diphtheria is a very contagious bacterial infection that affects the nose and throat. It is very dangerous in children and the elderly. If diphtheria is not treated it may spread through the bloodstream leading to potentially life-threatening problems affecting the heart, kidneys, and the central nervous system.

How do I get diphtheria?

Diphtheria is easily passed from an infected person to others. It is spread through respiratory droplets. People can become infected in several ways:

- Transmission is primarily person-to-person through sneezing and coughing. The infection occurs through the respiratory system. If people do not properly wash their hands after sneezing or coughing, and then touch objects people will put in their mouths (e.g., toys), they can spread diphtheria to other people.
- It is sometimes spread to others who pick up tissues or drinking glasses that have been used by an infected person.
- People are contagious for 2 weeks or less (usually no more than 4 weeks). However, the bacteria have been detected in respiratory droplets for up to 6 months.
- Diphtheria has also been found in unpasteurized (raw) milk.

Symptoms

Onset of symptoms is sudden. Symptoms begin 1-10 days (usually 2-5 days) after ingesting the bacteria. Symptoms can include:

- Swollen neck glands
- Thick coating in the nose, throat, or airway (grayish white)
- Low-grade fever
- Difficulty breathing or swallowing
- Slurred speech or double vision

Prevention

- All children should be immunized with five doses of DTaP (Diphtheria, Tetanus, acellular Pertussis) vaccine. The DTaP vaccine is given at two, four, six, and 12-18 months of age, and between four and six years of age. A booster shot (Tdap) is now available and should be administered to 11-12 year olds.
- Follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's recommended childhood immunization schedule (ask your health care provider or local health department for a copy).

Treatment of diphtheria

- If you think you may have diphtheria, see a health care provider immediately for testing and treatment. If you work with small children (non-immunized), are involved in food preparation (especially milk), or work in health care, be sure the health care provider tests you for diphtheria.
- If you have been exposed to diphtheria, see a health care provider and stay home – **do not** go to school, child care, work, church or other public places. Children and health care workers with diphtheria should be **excluded** from school, work or child care settings.



Hand washing steps:

1. Use soap and warm running water.
2. Scrub hands for at least 20 seconds; use a nail brush.
3. Wash all surfaces:
 - Between fingers
 - Under fingernails
 - Back of hands
 - Wrists
4. Rinse well and dry hands with a clean paper towel.