

FACT SHEET

(Respiratory)

DIPHTHERIA

What is diphtheria?

Diphtheria is an acute disease with two main forms: respiratory and skin.

Who gets respiratory diphtheria?

Diphtheria is a rare disease in the United States, primarily because children are usually well vaccinated. Most cases occur among unvaccinated or inadequately vaccinated persons.

How is respiratory diphtheria spread?

Diphtheria is transmitted person-to-person by direct or indirect contact with the nose secretions of an infected person. Contact with clothing soiled with discharges from skin sores can cause illness, but this happens rarely. Some people have become ill after drinking raw milk.

What are the symptoms of respiratory diphtheria?

Initial symptoms of illness include a sore throat and low fever; persons may die because they can't breathe when the membrane obstructs the throat. Swelling of the neck ("bull neck") from inflammation can develop and is a sign of severe disease. Other possible symptoms include inflammation of the heart muscle and nerve paralysis. The respiratory form of diphtheria usually lasts several days; complications can persist for months.

How soon do the symptoms appear?

Respiratory diphtheria begins 2 - 5 days after infection.

How long can an infected person spread the virus?

A person is typically infectious 2 weeks or less. Persons who are treated with antibiotics are usually contagious for less than 4 days, but may carry the disease even after being treated. Persons are considered infectious until two nose and throat cultures (and cultures of skin lesions if present) are taken

What are the criteria for significant exposure to diphtheria?

Close contacts are defined as those who sleep in the same house or who share food, drink, or eating/drinking utensils with the case, child care contacts, as well as healthcare workers in contact with the case's oral or respiratory secretions. Those contacts that were in brief contact with the case, but do not meet the definition of a close contact are not considered significant contacts.

Can a person get diphtheria again?

Lifelong immunity is usually, but not always, acquired after disease.

What is the treatment for diphtheria?

After collection of specimens, cases and symptomatic close contacts should begin antibiotic treatment as follows:

Is there a vaccine to prevent diphtheria?

Yes, there is a vaccine to protect against diphtheria. Vaccination, including routine childhood vaccination and Td boosters beginning at age 11 – 12 years (including a one-time dose of Tdap vaccine) and continuing every 10 years thereafter, is the best preventive measure against diphtheria.