



# Diphtheria

## What is diphtheria?

Diphtheria is a disease caused by bacteria. It is rare in the United States because most people have been vaccinated. People who become ill with diphtheria can have swelling of the throat, nose and tonsils which can be severe. In some people, diphtheria can be deadly. Some strains of the germ can produce a toxin that damages the heart and nerves.

## What are the symptoms?

Infection usually causes sore throat, fever (101 degrees or higher), and chills. A thick coating can develop in the nose or back of the throat. It may make it hard to breathe or swallow.

## Who gets diphtheria?

Diphtheria is more likely to affect adults and children who have not been immunized. There are different types of vaccines against diphtheria which are used in different age groups. These vaccines often also provide protection against tetanus (lockjaw) and pertussis (whooping cough).

## How does diphtheria spread?

Diphtheria spreads when an infected person coughs or sneezes and other people breathe in the infected droplets. A person can spread the disease for up to 2 weeks after infection. People who live in the same house as someone with diphtheria are at highest risk for getting infected. They should see a healthcare provider to be tested and given antibiotics to prevent them from getting ill. Some may also need immunization with diphtheria vaccine.

## What is the treatment for diphtheria?

Antibiotics and antitoxins are used to treat diphtheria. Supportive treatment such as rest, plenty of fluids, and use of fever reducing medicines are also important.

## How serious is diphtheria?

About 1 out of every 10 people who get diphtheria will not recover. This risk is even higher in children younger than 5 years of age. Fortunately, effective vaccines are available to prevent diphtheria. In Boston, all cases of suspected diphtheria are required to be reported immediately to local health departments.

## When should someone get vaccinated against diphtheria?

Most children in the United States are given DTaP vaccine to protect them against tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis at the following ages:

- One dose at 2 months, 4 months, and 6 months
- A fourth dose at 15 through 18 months; and
- A fifth dose at 4 through 6 years of age

Adults should also be vaccinated against diphtheria every 10 years. This is often given as Td, a vaccine that protects against both tetanus and diphtheria or Tdap, a vaccine that protects against tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis. If you are not sure that your family is up to date, check with your healthcare provider.

