

What is diphtheria?

Diphtheria is a highly infectious bacterial disease which causes inflammation of the throat, nose and tonsils, as well as a high fever. It can interfere with swallowing and may cause suffocation. The infection may also produce toxins that circulate through the blood damaging the heart, kidneys, and nervous system. Death occurs in five percent to ten percent of cases of diphtheria. Every year in the United States, only a few people get diphtheria.

Who gets diphtheria?

In the past when diphtheria was more common, children under 15 years of age who had not been immunized were the most likely to get diphtheria. In recent years, diphtheria is more likely to affect adults who have not been recently immunized.

How is diphtheria spread?

Diphtheria is spread after an infected person coughs or sneezes and other people then breathe in infected droplets. Rarely, diphtheria is spread by contact with articles soiled with discharge from skin sores of an infected person.

What are the symptoms of diphtheria?

The symptoms of diphtheria vary depending on what part of the body is infected. The most common infection occurs in the throat and tonsils causing symptoms from a slight fever, chills, and sore throat to a severe feeling of general illness. In severe cases, neck swelling may occur. Other symptoms which may occur include hoarseness, barking cough, runny nose, scaly rash and open skin sores.

How long is an infected person able to spread diphtheria?

Usually an infected person is able to spread diphtheria for 2 to 4 weeks after symptoms develop. The rare chronic carrier (a person with continual infection) may be infectious for 6 months or longer. Treatment with antibiotics will prevent an infected person from spreading diphtheria.

Can a person get diphtheria again?

Usually, once a person has had diphtheria, he or she would be protected against another diphtheria infection. However, sometimes a person may get diphtheria a second time.

What is the treatment for diphtheria?

Antibiotics and antitoxin are used to treat diphtheria. Also, breathing treatments are often given.

Should persons who have been around a person infected with diphtheria be treated?

People who live in the same household as a person with diphtheria and people who have close, habitual contact with a diphtheria patient should receive antibiotics to prevent them from becoming ill. These people should be tested for diphtheria and examined every day for seven days for signs of the disease. Also, some may need to be immunized with diphtheria vaccine.

How can diphtheria be prevented?

The main way that diphtheria is prevented is by receiving DTaP vaccination (diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis). The shot series starts with the first dose at 2 months of age and ends with a booster dose given before age seven with a total of five doses. Adults should receive a booster dose of Td (tetanus, diphtheria) every ten years.

Does the diphtheria vaccine cause reactions?

The risk of DTaP causing serious harm is extremely small. However, a vaccine, like any medicine, is capable of causing serious problems, such as severe allergic reactions. Up to 25% of children experience mild symptoms including : fever, redness, or soreness /tenderness where the shot was given. These problems occur more often after the 4th and 5th doses of the DTaP series than after earlier doses. Sometimes the 4th or 5th dose of DTaP vaccine is followed by swelling of the entire arm or leg in which the shot was given, lasting one to seven days. Very rarely (one out of one million doses), children experience severe allergic reactions.

Where can a person receive diphtheria vaccine?

All county health departments in Oklahoma administer the DTaP vaccine. Also, you may speak with your local health care provider.

