



CALHOUN COUNTY

Public Health Department

190 E Michigan Ave
Battle Creek, MI 49014

calhouncountymi.gov/publichealth
269-969-6370

Fact Sheet

Diphtheria

What is diphtheria?

Diphtheria is caused by toxin-producing bacteria called *Corynebacterium diphtheriae*. It can cause serious respiratory, circulatory, and nervous system issues.

Prior to vaccination in the United States, diphtheria was a leading cause of childhood death. Although the disease has been nearly eradicated in the United States, there have been outbreaks reported worldwide that have caused serious illness. The United States has only had 10 confirmed cases since 2001. Most cases since 1970 have occurred in people over the age of 15 years, largely due to a lack of continued immunization as adults.

What are the symptoms of diphtheria?

Usually, symptoms appear 2–5 days after exposure, but occasionally longer. The symptoms of respiratory disease include:

- Sore throat
- Weakness
- Mild fever
- Swollen glands in the neck
- Difficulty breathing and swallowing

Within two to three days, the toxin from the bacteria kills healthy tissues in the respiratory tract and the dead tissue forms a thick, gray coating that can build up in the throat or nose, which causes difficulty breathing.

Skin infections may look like a scaling rash or ulcers with clearly defined edges and membranes.

How is diphtheria spread?

The bacteria are spread to others by coughing or sneezing. It can also be spread by contact with wound secretions of an individual with skin infection, though this is very rare.

Without antibiotic treatment, the person is contagious for 2 weeks or less, but sometimes can be contagious up to 4 weeks.

How is diphtheria diagnosed?

Diphtheria is usually diagnosed by the signs and symptoms of the disease. A throat or nose swab can test for the bacteria that cause diphtheria. Testing can also be done on a sample from an open sore or ulcer on the skin. Testing for the bacteria can take time, so it is important to start treatment right away if a doctor suspects respiratory diphtheria.

What is the treatment for diphtheria?

Diphtheria treatment involves:

- Using diphtheria antitoxin to stop the toxin made by the bacteria from damaging the body. The treatment is very important for respiratory diphtheria infections, but it is rarely used for diphtheria skin infections.
- Using antibiotics to kill and get rid of the bacteria. This is important for both diphtheria in the respiratory system and on the skin.

Are there complications from diphtheria?

If diphtheria is not properly diagnosed and treated, it can cause serious complications such as heart failure and paralysis. Additionally, if the toxin gets into the bloodstream, it can cause heart, nerve, and kidney damage. The gray coating produced by dead respiratory cells can cause airway obstruction.

About 1 out of 10 people who get diphtheria dies. In children younger than 5 years, as many as 1 out of 5 children who get diphtheria dies.

Complications and deaths are much less frequent in cases of diphtheria infections in the skin.

How can diphtheria be prevented?

The best prevention is to receive the vaccine, which will create immunity to the toxin that causes the illness. Children should finish their primary series of DTaP (diphtheria, pertussis, and tetanus), which consists of five doses.

Children should get a booster vaccine called Tdap (which protects against tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis) once at 11 or 12 years of age.

Adults should have a Td (tetanus and diphtheria) booster every ten years. In the case of a major or contaminated wound, if it has been longer than five years, a Td booster should be given to provide protection against tetanus. Adults should also receive a one-time shot of the Tdap vaccine in place of one Td shot.

How do I get more information on diphtheria?

Calhoun County Public Health Department

Phone: 269-969-6383

 www.facebook.com/CCPublicHealthDepartment/

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Phone: 800-232-4636 (800-CDC-INFO)

Website: www.cdc.gov/diphtheria/index.html

Spanish: <https://www.cdc.gov/diphtheria/about/symptoms-sp.html>

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