

# quick facts

## *About...Diphtheria*

### **What is diphtheria?**

Diphtheria is a bacterial infection that affects the upper respiratory system, including the tonsils, throat, larynx (voice box), and nose. Respiratory diphtheria is a serious infection that can be fatal. Less severe diphtheria infections may affect the skin and other mucous membranes, such as the conjunctivae (lining of the eyelid) or genitals. Diphtheria is extremely rare in the United States but is still common in other areas of the world.

### **What are the symptoms of diphtheria?**

Symptoms of respiratory diphtheria may begin slowly and include headache, general discomfort, fever, sore throat with a yellow-white or gray membrane-like covering the back of the throat, and swollen lymph nodes in the neck. With some types of diphtheria, there may be a clear or bloody nasal discharge. Symptoms of skin (cutaneous) or mucus membrane infections include a scaly rash or blisters that become painful open sores or skin ulcers.

### **How is diphtheria spread?**

Respiratory diphtheria is spread by contact with the nose or throat secretions of an infected person. This can happen when someone coughs or sneezes near someone else or when someone touches objects contaminated with nose or throat drainage. Diphtheria may also be spread by contact with infected skin lesions.

### **Who is at risk for diphtheria?**

Individuals who are not up-to-date on their vaccinations are at risk for diphtheria, especially if they spend time in developing countries. Risk of diphtheria is low in the United States, but it is important to have a tetanus-diphtheria (Td) booster every ten years.

### **How do I know if I have diphtheria?**

See your health care provider. If you have been exposed to someone with diphtheria or if you have symptoms that match those described above, your health care provider may test you for diphtheria. Many other organisms can cause throat infections. If you have been vaccinated against diphtheria, it is very unlikely that you have the disease.

### **How can diphtheria be treated?**

Since diphtheria is a bacterial infection, it can be treated with the appropriate antibiotics. Antitoxin may also be administered. Your health care provider will determine which treatment is best for you.

### **How can diphtheria be prevented?**

Several vaccines are available to prevent diphtheria. Diphtheria vaccine is combined with tetanus and pertussis vaccines in different amounts for children and adults. Adults should receive routine tetanus-diphtheria (Td) every ten years. Tdap vaccine, which also protects against pertussis (whooping cough), should be used to replace one routine Td dose for adults and adolescents. Children should receive the recommended doses of DTaP, Tdap, DT, or Td vaccines on the appropriate schedule. Your health care provider can determine which vaccine is right for you.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to: <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/diphtheria/in-short-both.htm>.

This page was last reviewed on November 8, 2008.



**Indiana State  
Department of Health**