

Diphtheria Fact Sheet

Toledo-Lucas County Health Department | Emergency Preparedness



What is Diphtheria?

Diphtheria is an infection caused by the *Corynebacterium diphtheriae* bacterium. It causes a thick covering in the back of the throat. It can lead to difficulty breathing, heart failure, paralysis, and even death. Vaccines are recommended for infants, children, teens, and adults to prevent diphtheria.

How does diphtheria spread?

Diphtheria is spread from person to person, usually through respiratory droplets, like coughing or sneezing. Rarely, people can get sick from touching open sores or clothes that touched open sores of someone sick with diphtheria. A person also can get diphtheria by coming in contact with an object, like a toy, that has the bacteria that causes diphtheria on it.

What are possible symptoms?

When the bacteria that cause diphtheria get into and attach to the lining of the respiratory system, which includes parts of the body that help you breathe, they produce a poison (toxin) that can cause:

- Weakness
- Sore throat
- Fever
- Swollen glands in the neck

The poison destroys healthy tissues in the respiratory system. Within two to three days, the dead tissue forms a thick, gray coating that can build up in the throat or nose. This thick gray coating is called a “pseudomembrane.” It can cover tissues in the nose, tonsils, voice box, and throat, making it very hard to breathe and swallow.

How is diphtheria diagnosed?

Doctors usually decide if a person has diphtheria by looking for common signs and symptoms. They can use a swab from the back of the throat and test it for the bacteria that cause diphtheria. A doctor can also take a sample from a skin lesion (like a sore) and try and grow the bacteria to be sure a patient has diphtheria.



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What is the treatment for diphtheria?

It is important to start treatment right away if a doctor suspects diphtheria and not to wait for laboratory confirmation. Diphtheria treatment today involves:

- Using diphtheria antitoxin to stop the poison (toxin) produced by the bacteria from damaging the body
- Using antibiotics to kill and get rid of the bacteria

Diphtheria patients are usually kept in isolation, until they are no longer contagious. This usually takes about 48 hours after starting antibiotics. After the patient finishes the antibiotics, the doctor will run tests to make sure the bacteria are not present in the patient's body anymore.

For more information:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):
<https://www.cdc.gov/diphtheria/index.html>

The Toledo-Lucas County Health Department is committed to providing relevant and timely information during a public health emergency.

For the latest information, please visit:
www.lucascountyhealth.com



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