Diphtheria

Frequently Asked Questions

What is diphtheria?
Diphtheria is a severe respiratory disease that is caused by a toxin-producing bacterium.

Who gets diphtheria?
Diphtheria occurs in people of all ages. Before the availability of a vaccine, respiratory diphtheria was a common childhood illness. There are still cases of diphtheria around the world where populations are not vaccinated against the disease. Adults can be at risk as protection against diphtheria decreases over time.

How do people get diphtheria?
Diphtheria bacteria can live in the mouth, nose and throat of an infected person and are spread by coughing and sneezing. A person with respiratory diphtheria can spread the disease for about two to four weeks. Diphtheria bacteria can also cause a rash and sores on a person's skin. In that case, diphtheria can be spread from touching the discharge from an infected sore. There are still cases of diphtheria around the world where populations are not vaccinated against the disease.

What are the symptoms of diphtheria?
The first symptoms include:
* Sore throat
* Low-grade fever
* Chills

A thick coating at the back of the throat can develop, which can make it difficult to breathe or swallow Neck swelling is a sign of severe diphtheria. If diphtheria is not treated immediately, the bacteria can release a toxin (poison). This toxin causes complications such as:
* Inflammation of the heart muscle
* Inflammation of the nerves, which can cause temporary paralysis
If the muscle paralysis affects the diaphragm, a person can develop pneumonia or respiratory failure.

How is diphtheria diagnosed?
A health care provider diagnoses diphtheria by observing signs and symptoms and sending a sample of skin, mucus or tissue to be examined in a laboratory.

What is the treatment for diphtheria?
Since diphtheria is caused by a bacterium, it can be treated with antibiotics. There is a diphtheria anti-toxin vaccine that can be used to reduce the effect of the toxin that is released into the body.

How can diphtheria be prevented?
Diphtheria is a vaccine preventable disease. Getting vaccinated against diphtheria will protect people from getting this disease.

Who should get the diphtheria vaccine?
The diphtheria anti-toxin vaccine is combined with the pertussis and tetanus anti-toxin vaccines. Diphtheria anti-toxin vaccine is not available as a single vaccine. The type of combination vaccination that is given depends on the person's age. The DTaP/ DT vaccine is given to infants and children younger than seven years. The Tdap/Td vaccine is available for older children and adults. Even if a person was infected with diphtheria in the past, he/she can still get it again. For this reason it is important to give the diphtheria vaccine to a person who has had diphtheria.

Where can I get more information on diphtheria?
- Your health care provider
- Your local health department localhealth.nj.gov
- NJ Department of Health nj.gov/health/
- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd/diphtheria/index.html