

Diphtheria

Illness requiring droplet precautions

This handout describes diphtheria. It explains how the disease can be spread and how to keep others from getting it.

What is diphtheria?

Diphtheria is an infection of the *respiratory* (breathing) system. It is caused by bacteria called *Corynebacterium diphtheriae*.

There are 4 different vaccines:

- DTaP and DT for children younger than 7 years old
- Tdap and Td for older children and adults



Doctors advise getting a new diphtheria vaccine every 10 years.

Because most children in the U.S. receive the vaccine, diphtheria is now a rare disease in this country. Fewer than 5 people get the disease each year. But, doctors advise that everyone get a new vaccine every 10 years. This is because protection from the vaccine gets less over time.

Diphtheria is a *reportable* disease. Your doctor must tell the health department when someone is diagnosed with diphtheria. This is because diphtheria poses a *community health risk*. Anyone who has been exposed should be treated to protect themselves and others.

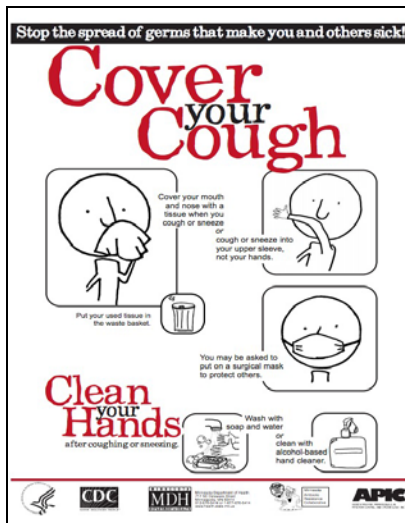
What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of diphtheria appear 2 to 4 days after someone is exposed to the bacteria. They include:

- Sore throat with low-grade fever and chills
- A membrane that sticks to the tonsils, nose, or *pharynx* (the area behind the nose and mouth)
- Neck swelling (when the disease is severe)
- Infected skin *lesions* (sores)

What are the risks of diphtheria?

If diphtheria is not diagnosed and treated, it can produce a strong *toxin* (poison) that spreads throughout the body. This toxin can cause serious



To Learn More

To learn more about diphtheria, visit:

- www.cdc.gov/diphtheria/
- www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd/diphtheria/index.html

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

Infection Prevention:
206.598.6122

problems such as heart failure or *paralysis* (not able to move). Sometimes a thick membrane forms, making it hard to swallow or even breathe. About 10% of people (10 people out of 100) who get diphtheria die from it.

How is diphtheria spread?

When someone who is infected coughs, sneezes, or talks, droplets that contain the bacteria spray into the air. Other people can get the disease when they breathe in these droplets, or touch a surface and then put their fingers in their nose or mouth. The disease also spreads if someone touches the skin sores.

Someone with diphtheria is *contagious* (can spread the disease to others) for about 2 to 4 weeks. If you have diphtheria, please practice “respiratory hygiene.” Wear a mask, wash your hands often, and dispose of tissues in wastebaskets when coming into a healthcare facility.

Pick up a free “Cover Your Cough Kit” at the Information Desk in the main lobby of the hospital, or at your clinic.

How is diphtheria diagnosed?

Most times, your healthcare provider can diagnose diphtheria by your symptoms. They may also take a swab of your nose or throat and send it to the lab to be tested.

How are others protected from diphtheria?

At UW Medical Center, we place a “Droplet Precautions” sign near the door of your room. This tells healthcare workers and your visitors to follow certain precautions when caring for you.

If you are in droplet precautions:

- Hospital staff and visitors will wear masks, gowns, and gloves when they enter your room.
- People who have not been vaccinated within the past 5 years, or who may be at risk of getting the disease, may not enter your room.
- **We advise hand washing for 15 seconds, using alcohol hand gels, and environmental cleanliness.**
- We will ask you to stay in your room unless you need to go to other areas of the hospital for treatment. If you leave your room, we will ask you to wash your hands and wear a yellow gown, gloves, and a mask.
- Please do **not** use the nutrition rooms. When you want a snack or ice water, ask a member of your care team to bring it to you.

When can droplet precautions be stopped?

We will keep you in droplet precautions for diphtheria until your doctor says you are well. This usually means for at least 4 weeks.