



Hawaii State Department of Health

Disease Investigation Branch

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Diphtheria

What is diphtheria?

Diphtheria is a highly contagious, life-threatening bacterial disease that mainly affects the tonsils, throat, nose, and skin. It is caused by a bacterium called *Corynebacterium diphtheriae*.

How do you get it?

Anyone who is not immunized against diphtheria can get the disease. Diphtheria is spread to others through close or direct contact with the body fluids from an infected person. It may also be spread by contact with personal items such as blankets or clothing that were used by a person with diphtheria.

What are the symptoms of diphtheria?

The symptoms include sore throat, mild fever and swelling in the neck, and painful, swollen red sores.

When do symptoms start?

The symptoms commonly begin 2 to 5 days after exposure to the bacteria, but they can start in 1 to 6 days.

For how long is a person contagious?

Persons with diphtheria who do not get treatment are usually contagious for less than 2 weeks. Although rare, some people may spread the bacteria for 6 months or more. When treated with medicine, the contagious period can be reduced to less than 4 days.

What is the treatment for diphtheria?

A doctor can prescribe medicines to treat diphtheria. If diphtheria is not treated, serious problems such as paralysis, heart failure, and blood disorders may occur.

If you get diphtheria once, can you get it again?

Yes. Having diphtheria does not always protect you from getting it a second time.

Is there a vaccine for diphtheria?

Yes. Diphtheria vaccine is usually given in a shot together with tetanus and pertussis vaccines, and is known as DTaP vaccine. A child should have had four DTaP shots by 18 months of age, with a booster shot at 4 to 6 years of age. DT does not contain pertussis and is used as a substitute for children who cannot tolerate the pertussis vaccine. Tetanus-diphtheria (Td) vaccine is administered to people 7 years and older and should be given every 10 years. The newly licensed Tdap vaccine is similar to Td, but also contains protection against pertussis. It can be used in place of one Td booster in adolescents and adults up to age 64.

How can you keep from getting diphtheria?

Get immunized. The best way to keep from getting diphtheria is to make sure that you get immunized.

For more information, see the CDC's website at http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/diphtheria_t.htm