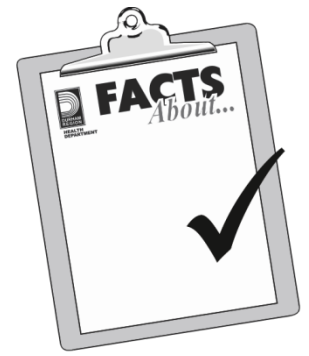




# FACTS

## About...



HEALTH DEPARTMENT



# Diphtheria

## What is it?

Diphtheria is a vaccine preventable disease caused by bacteria. The bacteria produce a toxin (poison) that is carried in the blood stream. This serious infection which often involves the nose, throat and less frequently the skin, may cause serious complications such as heart, breathing, nerve and kidney problems.

In 1924, before a vaccine was available, there were 9,000 cases of diphtheria reported in Canada and it was one of the most common causes of death in children from one to five years of age. Since routine immunization of children began in the 1930s, there has been a remarkable decline in the disease.

## How is it spread?

The bacteria that causes diphtheria is spread from person to person through direct contact with nose and throat secretions of an infected person and less commonly through contact with discharge from skin sores or freshly contaminated objects. Healthy people can be carriers of the bacteria as the bacteria can live in the nose and throat of a person without causing any symptoms. Both people who are sick with diphtheria and healthy carriers of the bacteria can spread the disease. People sick with diphtheria can spread bacteria for more than four weeks after the infection but treatment with antibiotics shortens this period to fewer than four days.

## What do I look for?

Symptoms of diphtheria include fever, cough, sore throat and loss of appetite. Within one to two days, pain in the throat becomes severe and breathing problems may occur. Grey patches may be seen in the throat. The glands in the neck become very swollen and tender.

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For more information

Durham Region Health Department

905-668-2020 1-800-841-2729 durham.ca

If you require this information in an accessible format, contact 1-800-841-2729.



## How is it treated?

Treatment of diphtheria consists of a medication (anti-toxin) to fight the diphtheria toxin and antibiotics to fight the bacteria. For people who have been in close contact with someone with diphtheria, it may be recommended that medication be taken to prevent them from getting sick.

## How can I protect myself?

- Diphtheria is best prevented by vaccination.
- See *Facts About...* Diphtheria, Pertussis, Tetanus, Polio & Haemophilus Influenza B Vaccines.
- Keep up to date with vaccinations and speak to your health care provider about your need for other vaccines.
- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water or use hand sanitizer when hands are not visibly dirty.
- Cough or sneeze into your elbow, and encourage others to do the same.
- Wash your hands after handling nose and throat secretions (e.g., after disposal of facial tissues containing nose and throat secretions).
- Do not share water bottles, straws, eating utensils, cigarettes, toothbrushes, toys or anything else that has been in contact with saliva, nose or throat secretions.
- If you are ill, stay at home and isolate yourself from others.

October 17, 2019

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