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 much 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 1 to 5 years of age.

Since routine immunization of children began in the 1930's, there has been a remarkable decline in diphtheria, and it is rare in Canada. However, diphtheria occurs worldwide and is still endemic in many countries.

How is it spread?

The bacteria that cause diphtheria are spread from person to person through direct contact with nose and throat secretions and less commonly through contact with discharge from eye and skin lesions. 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. Persons ill with diphtheria are more likely than healthy carriers to spread the infection because they have larger quantities of bacteria in the throat. Untreated people with diphtheria can spread bacteria from 2 to 4 weeks after infection. Treatment with antibiotics shortens this period to fewer than 4 days.

What do I look for?

Symptoms of diphtheria include fever, cough, sore throat, difficulty breathing, swollen neck glands and loss of appetite. Within a day or two, pain in the throat becomes severe and breathing problems may occur. Grey-coloured patches of pus can be seen in the throat making it hard to swallow. The glands in the neck become very swollen and tender.

How is it treated?

Treatment of diphtheria consists of a medication (anti-toxin) to fight the diphtheria toxin and antibiotics to fight the bacteria. The Health Department will notify close contacts to recommend antibiotics to prevent disease.

How can I protect myself?

- Diphtheria is best prevented by vaccination.
- Keep up to date with vaccinations and speak to your doctor/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 discharges (i.e., after disposal of facial tissues containing nose and throat discharges).
- 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.
- See 'Facts About… Diphtheria, Pertussis, Tetanus, Polio, & Haemophilus Influenzae B Vaccines (Pediacel®)'

November 9, 2023

905-668-2020 or 1-800-841-2729 | **durham.ca/health**

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