

DIPHTHERIA

Patient Information Fact Sheet

›What is diphtheria?

Diphtheria is caused by a bacteria that lives in the respiratory tract of many people without causing disease. These people are called carriers and do not become infected because they have either been immunized or have immunity from having had the disease.

›What are the symptoms of diphtheria?

Symptoms include a sore throat with a grayish membrane. In severe cases the neck tissue may become swollen and can affect swallowing and breathing. In tropical countries the infection may occur in skin ulcers. After 2–6 weeks, the effects of a toxin produced by the bacteria become apparent with severe muscle weakness, mainly affecting the muscles of the head and neck. Inflammation of the heart muscle may cause heart failure.

›How do you contract diphtheria?

Diphtheria can spread through droplet infection from coughing and sneezing. Contact with articles soiled by infected persons may also transmit the wound-type infection. The incubation period is usually 2–5 days, but it can be longer.

›How diphtheria treated and prevented?

Diphtheria is treated with an antitoxin and antibiotics (usually **penicillin** or **erythromycin**). Treatment should not be delayed until laboratory confirmation is obtained.

There is an effective vaccine to protect against diphtheria. In the 1930s, routine childhood immunization against diphtheria was introduced in the United States. Travelers, who are recommended to have the vaccine for travel to high-risk areas, require a booster dose every 10 years if they have received a primary course. In 2002, the Department of Health recommended that people requiring a tetanus booster should receive the combined tetanus and diphtheria (Td) vaccine in response to waning immunity to diphtheria in the adult population.

›Further information

MASTA Travel Health: www.masta-travel-health.com.

Centers for Disease Control: <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/diphtheria/>

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