

Diphtheria General information

What is diphtheria?

Diphtheria is a disease of the nose and throat that is caused by bacteria. The bacteria are spread through contact with drops of fluid from the nose and throat of someone who has the disease. Diphtheria is rare in Nova Scotia because of routine childhood immunization.

Who can get diphtheria?

Anyone who comes in contact with the droplets of fluid from the nose or mouth of an infected person can get diphtheria. The disease can be spread to others for up to several months after a person becomes ill. With treatment they will not be able to spread the disease to others. It is important for people to be retested after treatment to make sure they have not become carriers.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms can include:

- low fever
- sore throat
- yellow discharge over the back of the throat, which may become grey and thick and cover the throat
- swelling of the neck

Symptoms may start as early as 2 days after a person has been in contact with someone who has the disease. Some people can become very ill and have problems breathing. They will need to be isolated from others, usually in hospital.

What is the treatment?

Diphtheria is treated with an antitoxin that will help to decrease the illness and the symptoms. Antibiotics will be prescribed by your doctor to help to treat the disease and to stop the spread of the disease. Children with diphtheria cannot attend school or day care until their throat swab tests show that they have no signs of the disease.

How can you prevent diphtheria?

- Every child should get diphtheria vaccine as part of childhood immunization.
- Every adolescent should be given diphtheria-tetanus vaccine as part of the school-based immunization program.
- Every adult should have diphtheria-tetanus vaccine every 10 years.