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Diphtheria

What is diphtheria?

Diphtheria is a very contagious and potentially life-threatening infection that usually attacks the throat and nose. The throat infection causes a gray to black, tough, fiber-like covering to develop, which can block the airways.

Diphtheria is caused by *Corynebacterium diphtheriae*, a bacterium. The bacterium produces a toxin (poison) that can travel through the bloodstream to attack the nerves and heart in more serious cases.

Diphtheria can be fatal. Between five and ten percent of patients who receive treatment die. If treatment is not available, the fatality rate is higher.

Diphtheria is common in many parts of the world, but is very rare in North America because of widespread immunization.

What are the signs and symptoms of diphtheria?

Symptoms of diphtheria usually develop between two and five days (with a range of one to 10 days) after infection with the bacteria. Early symptoms include a sore throat, mild fever and difficulty swallowing. The infection also causes the lymph glands and tissue on both sides of the neck to swell to an unusually large size.

How is diphtheria spread?

The diphtheria bacteria live in the mouth, nose, throat or skin of infected people. In rare instances, the bacteria can also be found in the eye membrane, vagina or ear.

The bacteria spread through respiratory droplets such as those produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Diphtheria can also be spread by contact with contaminated objects, such as tissues that have been used by an infected person.

An infected person carries the bacteria for about two weeks and is able to infect others during that time.

For further information, please call:
York Region Health Connection 1-800-361-5653
TTY 1-866-252-9933 or visit www.york.ca

Can diphtheria be prevented?

Immunization is the best method of prevention. All children should receive a vaccine containing protection against diphtheria at two months, four months, six months, 18 months and again between four and six years old. A booster dose is recommended ten years after the four to six-year-old dose and every 10 years after.

What is the treatment for diphtheria?

Diphtheria is a medical emergency. A person with diphtheria should be hospitalized until fully recovered. The person should be given diphtheria antitoxin to fight the diphtheria poison and antibiotics to fight the diphtheria bacteria.

Antibiotic treatment usually makes the patient non-infectious within 24 hours. Unless immunized, children and adults may be infected with the disease more than once.

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