

# Facts About Diphtheria for Adults

## What is diphtheria?

Diphtheria is an acute bacterial disease that usually affects the tonsils, throat, nose and/or skin. It is usually spread from person to person by breathing in droplets that contain diphtheria bacteria. These droplets are produced after an infected person has coughed, sneezed or even laughed. The disease can also be spread by contact with items such as drinking glasses and soiled tissues which are contaminated by discharges from an infected person. Diphtheria bacteria can cause a “membrane” to form over the throat that can lead to breathing problems. Untreated diphtheria can occasionally result in heart failure, paralysis or death. Although no longer a common disease in the US, diphtheria remains a large problem in other countries and can pose a serious threat to those not fully immunized who travel to other countries or have contact with international travelers coming to the US.

### Prevention

There is a vaccine to prevent diphtheria. Most people receive their first doses as children in the form of a combined vaccine called DTwP (diphtheria-tetanus-whole-cell pertussis) or DTaP (diphtheria and tetanus toxoids and acellular pertussis). At age 11 –12, children also receive a booster dose of a combined vaccine called Td (tetanus and diphtheria toxoids) or Tdap (tetanus and diphtheria toxoids and acellular pertussis for adolescents and adults)

For adults, a combination vaccine, called a Td booster, protects against both tetanus and diphtheria. It should be administered once every 10 years from the last dose of a diphtheria-containing vaccine to maintain immunity. Adults 19-64 years should receive a single dose of Tdap to replace one Td booster.

### Symptoms

In its early stages, diphtheria may be mistaken for a severe sore throat. Other symptoms include a low grade fever and enlarged lymph nodes (swollen glands) located in the neck. Another presentation of diphtheria can be skin lesions that may be painful, red and swollen. Symptoms usually appear 2 to 4 days after infection, with a range of 1 to 6 days. Untreated diphtheria patients may continue to carry diphtheria bacteria and can be contagious for up to 4 weeks. Some persons may also carry the diphtheria bacteria and spread the disease even though they themselves do not develop symptoms.

## Who should get Td/Tdap vaccine?

- ◆ All persons who did not receive a primary series of immunization against tetanus and diphtheria during childhood.
- ◆ Persons who have not received a booster dose within the past 10 years.
- ◆ All adolescents and adults who deferred their regular booster during 2001-2002 because of shortages of the vaccine – the supply problems have been resolved.
- ◆ Among adolescents aged 11-18 years and adults 19-64 years who have not already received Tdap (Td in combination with acellular pertussis antigens), a single dose of Tdap is preferred for the regular booster (rather than Td) to add protection against pertussis (whooping cough) .
- ◆ Adults who have recovered from diphtheria disease.

### Vaccine Safety

The tetanus and diphtheria (Td) and tetanus, diphtheria and acellular pertussis (Tdap) vaccines are very safe, and very few people experience any side effects. When side effects do occur, they are usually soreness, redness or swelling at the injection site, and a slight fever. As with any medicine, there are very small risks that serious problems could occur after getting the vaccine. The potential risks associated with diphtheria are much greater than the potential risks associated with the diphtheria vaccine. You cannot get diphtheria from the vaccine.

# Facts About Diphtheria for Adults

- FACT:** Diphtheria can be prevented with safe and effective vaccines.
- FACT:** You cannot get diphtheria from the vaccine.
- FACT:** Diphtheria is transmitted to others through close contact with discharges from an infected person's nose, throat, eyes and/or skin lesions.
- FACT:** Nearly one out of every 10 people who get diphtheria will die from it.
- FACT:** Diphtheria can lead to breathing problems, and sometimes heart failure, paralysis or death if untreated.
- FACT:** Most cases of diphtheria occur among people who are unvaccinated or inadequately vaccinated.
- FACT:** Contracting diphtheria is not always followed by lasting immunity, so even those persons who have recently recovered from the disease need to be immunized.
- FACT:** A tetanus-diphtheria (Td) shot every 10 years gives protection against both tetanus and diphtheria. A tetanus-diphtheria-acellular pertussis (Tdap) shot gives protection against tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis.
- FACT:** Although no longer a common disease in the United States, diphtheria remains a large problem in other countries and can pose a serious threat to United States citizens who may not be fully immunized and who travel to other countries or have contact with immigrants or international travelers coming to the U.S.
- FACT:** An epidemic of diphtheria in Eastern Europe and the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union resulted in over 160, 000 cases and over 4,000 deaths between 1990 and 2001.