

# Diphtheria

## Fact Sheet

### What is it?

Diphtheria is caused by a toxin-producing strain of bacteria named *Corynebacterium diphtheriae*. It occurs worldwide but is rare where children and adults are immunized. There have been no cases reported in Ontario since 1998. It is usually a disease found in temperate climates during the colder months.

### What are the signs and symptoms?

Symptoms are similar to a respiratory infection with sore throat, a low grade fever, and inflammation of the tonsils, pharynx or nose. In severe disease, breathing obstruction caused by neck swelling can occur. The case fatality rate remains at 5-10%.

### How is it spread?

It is spread by contact with respiratory droplets from the nose or throat of an infected person. It has also been spread in raw milk. The incubation period is usually two to five days, but can be as long as ten.

### How is the illness treated?

Antibiotics are required to kill the bacteria and prevent spread. Once recovered, the person should be immunized against diphtheria.

All household contacts will need swabs taken from their nose and throat before being started on antibiotics to prevent disease.

### How can it be prevented?

Immunization against diphtheria is the best form of prevention.

### Other Questions?

Talk to your health care provider or call our Communicable Disease Program at 613-966-5500 or 1-800-267-2803, ext. 349. | TTY Dial 711 (1-800-267-6511) | [hpePublicHealth.ca](http://hpePublicHealth.ca)

### References

- Infectious Diseases Protocol, 2009. The Ministry of Health & Long Term Care.
- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, Diphtheria, October 2005.
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