

Diphtheria - Community Information for Contacts

Questions and Answers for Community Members

IMPORTANT - Read this carefully

You have been told that you are a close contact of someone who has diphtheria. This means you may have been exposed to this infection, which may make you sick. The clinic or public health team will tell you what you need to do. This document answers common questions but does NOT replace advice from your clinic or health worker.

Why has the clinic given me antibiotics if I am not sick?

Contacts are given antibiotics so that you don't get sick. The purpose is to:

- Kill any diphtheria bacteria you may be carrying before they make you sick
- Stop you from spreading the bacteria to others – including Elders, babies, and people with weak immune systems
- Reduce the chance of the infection becoming serious

It is important to take the antibiotics every day until they are all finished.

If you are the contact of someone with Diphtheria

Watch closely for any of these symptoms over the next 7 days and tell your clinic.

Throat symptoms

- Sore throat
- Fever
- Voice changes
- Difficulty swallowing or breathing
- Swollen neck

Skin symptoms

- A sore or ulcer that is slow to heal
- Grey or yellowish stuff in the sore
- Soreness, redness or swelling around a skin sore

How does diphtheria spread?

Diphtheria spreads when an infected person talks, coughs or sneezes. The infection may be breathed in by those nearby.

Diphtheria is also spread by touching skin sores. The bacteria can also spread from hands, tissues, towels that are used by a person with the infection.

Staying in the same house or sharing a bed with someone who has diphtheria might mean you could get it too.

Can someone spread diphtheria without feeling sick?

Yes. Some people carry the diphtheria bacteria in their nose, throat or skin without even knowing. They can still spread the infection to others even if they don't feel sick. This is one reason why contacts are tested and given antibiotics even when they feel well. If you are given antibiotics, it is important to take them even if you don't feel sick.

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You must finish all your tablets

This is one of the most important things you can do. Here is why:

- Taking only some of them may not fully clear the bacteria from your body
- You may still be able to spread diphtheria to others even if you feel well
- Stopping early can make diphtheria harder to treat for everyone in the future

If you cannot take the tablets (vomiting, side effects, trouble swallowing), tell your clinic.

What good hygiene steps should I take?

- Wash hands often with soap and water, especially before eating and after touching any wounds or skin sores
- Best to not share towels, clothing, cups, plates, or knives and forks
- Keep any skin sores clean and covered with a waterproof dressing if possible
- Wash bedding and towels separately and regularly
- Cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing and put tissues in the bin

What if I miss a dose?

Take the missed dose as soon as you remember. If it is almost time for the next dose, skip the missed one and continue as normal – do not take a double dose. If you are unsure, ask the clinic.

Will I also be given a vaccine?

Yes, if you have not had a vaccine in the last 12 months or if you haven't had all the past vaccines yet. The vaccine stops you getting very sick from diphtheria but it doesn't kill the bug, so you still need to take the antibiotics as well.

Should I stay away from school, work, shops or going out?

You can go out in the community, but you should try to stay away from elders, babies and people who are sick with other things until you have had 3 days of antibiotics. Its best to not share towels, cups or beds with others for 3 days of antibiotics also.

✓ Do's

- Take the antibiotics given to you by the clinic, for the full course
- Go to the clinic immediately if you develop any symptoms
- Get your vaccine (booster) at the clinic if you are due or overdue
- Keep any skin sores covered
- Wash hands regularly with soap and water
- Avoid sharing towels, bedding, cups and plates
- Tell the clinic if you cannot take the tablets (e.g. vomiting)
- Keep young children, Elders and vulnerable people away from you if you have been closely exposed, until 72 hours of antibiotics are completed

X Do Not

- Do NOT stop taking antibiotics early, even if you feel fine
- Do NOT share towels, bedding, cups, plates or clothing with others in your household
- Do NOT ignore symptoms – even a mild sore throat or a slow-healing sore should be reported to the clinic
- Do NOT assume vaccination alone will protect you – antibiotics are also needed
- Do NOT use someone else's antibiotics or share yours