

Diphtheria Antitoxin Information Sheet

What is diphtheria?

Diphtheria is an acute bacterial infection of the mucous membranes of the upper respiratory tract (nose, tonsils, larynx, and pharynx). It can also involve other mucous membranes or the skin. The toxin produced by some strains of *Corynebacterium diphtheriae* bacteria causes a greyish white membrane surrounded by inflammation. Diphtheria can cause heart and neurological issues, even with treatment.

How is diphtheria spread?

Diphtheria is spread through respiratory secretions (droplets) and by direct contact with skin lesions. Diphtheria can also spread through contact with raw (unpasteurized) milk.

What are the symptoms of diphtheria?

Symptoms of diphtheria include fever, sore throat, loss of appetite and feeling unwell. Severe disease can cause extreme neck swelling (bull neck). Life threatening complications include upper airway obstruction, myocarditis, cranial and peripheral neuropathies.

How can diphtheria be prevented?

The best way to prevent diphtheria is to be immunized against this disease. Diphtheria vaccine is given to children as part of their routine immunizations. Diphtheria boosters are also recommended for adults every 10 years.

What is diphtheria antitoxin?

Diphtheria antitoxin is a blood product containing equine (horse) protein. The antitoxin binds to the circulating toxin produced by *Corynebacterium diphtheriae* and stops the progression of disease and further damage.

Is diphtheria antitoxin safe?

Immediate administration of diphtheria antitoxin is recommended after clinical diagnosis. Skin testing for hypersensitivity is recommended prior to administration.

Who should get diphtheria antitoxin?

Diphtheria antitoxin is given to an individual once a clinical diagnosis of diphtheria is made. The attending physician must access the diphtheria antitoxin through the Medical Officer of Health.

Who should not have diphtheria antitoxin?

There are no contraindications to diphtheria antitoxin because diphtheria is life-threatening. If you have had any of the following, speak to your health care provider:

- a history of severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) to diphtheria antitoxin or any of its components
- previous allergic reaction to equine protein

What are the possible side effects to diphtheria antitoxin?

Generalized redness, rash, fever, pain and swelling of the joints and lymph nodes and allergic reaction are all possible side effects to diphtheria antitoxin.

What should you do if you have a reaction to diphtheria antitoxin?

Individuals receiving diphtheria antitoxin would be hospitalized and under the direct care of a physician where reactions to this product would be monitored.

For health advice and information 24 hours a day, seven days a week, call **Health Link Alberta** at:

- 403-943-5465 in Calgary
- 780-408-5465 in Edmonton
- Toll free 1-866-408-5465 elsewhere in Alberta

Or visit www.MyHealth.Alberta.ca for health information online.

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