

Diphtheria and the Vaccine (Shot) to Prevent It

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The best way to protect against diphtheria is by getting the diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis shot (also called the DTaP shot). Doctors recommend that all children get the shot.

Why should my child get the DTaP shot?

The DTaP shot:

- Protects your child from diphtheria, a potentially serious disease, as well as tetanus and whooping cough (pertussis).
- Prevents your child from developing a thick coating in the back of the nose or throat from diphtheria that can make it hard to breathe or swallow.
- Keeps your child from missing school or child care (and keeps you from missing work to care for your sick child).

Is the DTaP shot safe?

Yes. The DTaP shot is very safe, and it is effective at preventing diphtheria. Vaccines, like any medicine, can have side effects. Most children who get the DTaP shot have no side effects.

What are the side effects?

Most children don't have any side effects from the shot. The side effects that do occur are usually mild, and may include:

- Redness, swelling, or pain where the shot was given
- Fever
- Vomiting

These types of side effects happen in about 1 out of every 4 children who get the shot.

More serious side effects are very rare but can include:

- A fever over 105 degrees
- Nonstop crying for 3 hours or more
- Seizures (jerking, twitching of the muscles, or staring)

What is diphtheria?

Diphtheria is a serious disease caused by a toxin (poison) made by bacteria. It causes a thick coating in the back of the nose or throat that makes it hard to breathe or swallow. It can be deadly.



Doctors recommend that your child get five doses of the DTaP vaccine for best protection. Your child will need one dose at each of the following ages:

- 2 months
- 4 months
- 6 months
- 15 through 18 months
- 4 through 6 years

What are the symptoms of diphtheria?

Diphtheria starts with a sore throat, mild fever (101 degrees or less), and chills. Next, the diphtheria toxin makes a thick coating in the back of the nose or throat. It may be white or grayish. The coating makes it hard to breathe or swallow.

Is it serious?

The coating in the back of the nose or throat can get so thick that it blocks the airway, so the person can't breathe.

The diphtheria toxin can affect the heart, causing an abnormal heart rhythm and even heart failure. It can also affect the nerves and lead to paralysis (unable to move parts of the body).

About 1 out of 10 people who get diphtheria dies. In children younger than 5 years old, as many as 1 out of 5 children who get diphtheria dies.

How does diphtheria spread?

Diphtheria spreads when an infected person coughs or sneezes. A person who does not receive treatment can spread the disease for about 2 weeks after infection.

A diphtheria booster is needed to keep up protection from diphtheria

The DTaP shot does not offer lifetime protection. People need booster vaccines to keep up protection from diphtheria.

Children should get a booster vaccine called Tdap (which helps to protect against tetanus, diphtheria, and whooping cough) at 11 or 12 years old. This should be followed by a Td (for tetanus and diphtheria) or Tdap shot every 10 years.

Where can I learn more about the DTaP shot and my child?

To learn more about the DTaP shot, talk to your child's doctor, call 1-800-CDC-INFO or visit www.cdc.gov/vaccines/parents.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, American Academy of Family Physicians, and the American Academy of Pediatrics strongly recommend all children receive their vaccines according to the recommended schedule.