

# 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 vaccine.**

## Why should my child get the DTaP shot?

The DTaP shot:

- Protects your child from diphtheria, a potentially serious disease (and also protects against tetanus and whooping cough)
- Prevents your child from developing a thick coating in the back of the nose or throat from diphtheria that can make it hard for him to breathe or swallow
- Keeps your child from missing school or childcare (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 (as well as whooping cough and tetanus). 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, like redness, swelling, and pain from the shot, fever, and vomiting. They happen in about 1 out of every 4 children who get the shot.

More serious side effects are rare but can include:

- A fever over 105 degrees
- Nonstop crying for 3 hours or more
- Seizures (jerking or 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.

## What are the symptoms of diphtheria?

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



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, and
- 4 through 6 years of age.

## Is it serious?

The coating on the throat can get so thick that it blocks the airway, so the person can't breathe.

The diphtheria toxin can affect the heart, causing abnormal heart rhythms 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, 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 can spread the disease for up to 2 weeks after infection.

## 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](http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/parents).

## Get a diphtheria booster every 10 years to keep up protection

The DTaP shot does not offer lifetime protection from the disease. Boosters are needed to keep up protection from diphtheria.

Children should get a booster vaccine called Tdap (which protects against tetanus, diphtheria, and whooping cough) once at 11 or 12 years of age.

Adults need a booster called the Td vaccine (for tetanus and diphtheria) every 10 years. Adults should also receive a one-time shot of the Tdap vaccine in place of one Td shot. Pregnant women should receive Tdap vaccine during the 3rd trimester of every pregnancy.

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.