

Diphtheria

Investigative Guidelines

June 2026

REPORT BY PHONE IMMEDIATELY (971) 673-1111

1. DISEASE REPORTING

1.1 Purpose of Reporting and Surveillance

1. Identify diphtheria cases.
2. Prevent the spread of diphtheria.
3. Identify groups of unimmunized children and adults.

1.2 Laboratory and Physician Reporting Requirements

Clinical cases of diphtheria and isolation of *Corynebacterium diphtheriae* known to be toxigenic should be reported immediately, day or night. If toxigenicity or strain is unknown, report within one local public health authority working day.

1.3 Local Health Department Reporting and Follow-Up Responsibilities

1. Report all confirmed and presumptive acute cases (see definitions below) to the Acute and Communicable Disease Prevention section (ACDP) immediately, day or night. Call 971-673-1111 to reach the state epidemiologist on call.
2. Begin investigation of all reported cases within 24 hours, chiefly to determine whether they truly have diphtheria. (Most will not.) Submit all case data electronically within 7 days of initial report.
3. Initiate special control measures within 24 hours of initial report:
 - Identify contacts of the case during the period of communicability.
 - As appropriate, alert physicians, hospital rooms, and other sites visited by the case during the period of communicability.

1.4 State Public Health Reporting Responsibilities

ACDP on-call epidemiologist should notify CDC Emergency Operations, immediately, day or night.

2. THE DISEASE AND ITS EPIDEMIOLOGY

2.1 Etiologic Agent

Corynebacterium diphtheriae is an aerobic, Gram-positive bacillus. *C. diphtheriae* has four biotypes—gravis, intermedius, belfanti and mitis. All four biotypes are capable of producing an identical exotoxin, which causes the classical manifestations of diphtheria. Toxin is produced by *C. diphtheriae* that are infected by a bacteriophage containing the *tox* gene.

Rarely, other *Corynebacterium* species (*C. ulcerans* or *C. pseudotuberculosis*) may produce diphtheria toxin. Both species are zoonotic; such infections have been documented in pigs, cattle, dogs, and cats. Toxigenic *C. ulcerans* may cause classic respiratory diphtheria-like illness, but person-to-person spread has not been documented. *C. pseudotuberculosis* can cause lymphadenitis in humans.

2.2 Description of Illness

Diphtheria is an acute bacterial infection caused by toxigenic strains of *Corynebacterium diphtheriae*. The toxin causes local tissue destruction and membrane formation. It primarily affects the tonsils, pharynx, nose and larynx. Other mucous membranes, skin, and rarely the vagina or conjunctivae can also be involved.

The onset is insidious with early symptoms of malaise, sore throat, anorexia and low-grade fever. The characteristic lesion of laryngeal diphtheria in the throat is an adherent greyish-white membrane that first occurs on the tonsils but may spread up onto the palate and involve the pharynx; respiratory obstruction can ensue. Laryngeal diphtheria can present as a slowly progressive croup that can result in death if the airway obstruction is not relieved.

Patients with severe pharyngeal disease may develop neck swelling, giving a characteristic “bull neck” appearance. Non-toxigenic strains of

C. diphtheriae rarely cause local lesions, but may cause infective endocarditis.

Non-toxin-producing strains of *C. diphtheriae* can also cause disease. It is generally less severe, potentially entailing a mild sore throat and, rarely, a membranous pharyngitis, although invasive disease, including bacteremia and endocarditis, has been reported.¹ While rare, non-toxigenic *tox*-gene-bearing (NTTB) strains have been detected in the United States and elsewhere. Disease caused by NTTB *C. diphtheriae* is similar in presentation to that of non-toxin-producing strains of *C. diphtheriae*, and isolation from the throat does not necessarily indicate a pathogenic role in the illness. Vaccination is highly protective against disease caused by toxin-producing strains but does not prevent carriage of *C. diphtheriae*, regardless of toxin production status. A small percentage of the population may be carriers of non-toxin-producing or toxin-producing strains of *C. diphtheriae*, but population carriage rates in the current era of high vaccine coverage are unknown.

Cutaneous infections from toxin-producing strains are typically mild and characterized by a scaling rash or by ulcers with clearly demarcated edges and membrane. Any chronic skin lesion may harbor *C. diphtheriae* along with other organisms. In recent decades, the organisms isolated from cases in the United States have generally been nontoxigenic. Cutaneous disease, both toxigenic and non-toxigenic strains, is far less severe than respiratory forms of disease.

While rarely progressing to invasive or systemic disease, cutaneous diphtheria may act as a reservoir for transmission and result in respiratory or cutaneous infections in other susceptible hosts.

2.3 Reservoirs

Humans are the usual reservoirs, and carriers are usually asymptomatic.

2.4 Sources and Routes of Transmission

Transmission is most often via person-to-person spread from the respiratory tract. Rarely, transmission may occur from skin lesions or articles soiled with discharges from lesions of infected persons (fomites).

2.5 Incubation Period

Typically, 2–5 (range, 1–10) days.

2.6 Period of Communicability

Transmission may occur as long as virulent bacilli are present in discharges and lesions. The time is variable, but organisms usually persist 2 weeks or less, and seldom more than 4 weeks, without antibiotics. Chronic carriers may shed organisms for 6 months or more. Effective antibiotic therapy promptly terminates shedding.

3. CASE DEFINITIONS, DIAGNOSIS, AND LABORATORY SERVICES

3.1 Confirmed Acute Case Definition

An upper respiratory tract illness with an adherent membrane of the nose, pharynx, tonsils, or larynx, and any of the following:

- isolation of toxin-producing *Corynebacterium diphtheriae* from the nose or throat; **or**
- epidemiologic linkage to a laboratory-confirmed case of diphtheria; (An epidemiologically linked case is one in which the patient has had contact with one or more persons who have or had the disease, and transmission of the agent by the usual modes of transmission is plausible. A case may be considered epidemiologically linked to a laboratory-confirmed case if at least one case in the chain of transmission is laboratory-confirmed.)

OR

- an infection at a non-respiratory anatomical site (e.g., skin, wound, conjunctiva, ear, genital mucosa, blood) with isolation of toxin-producing *C. diphtheriae* from that site.

3.2 Suspect Case Definition

In the absence of a more likely diagnosis, an upper respiratory tract illness with each of the following:

- an adherent membrane of the nose, pharynx, tonsils, or larynx, **and**
- absence of laboratory confirmation, **and**

- lack of epidemiologic linkage to a laboratory-confirmed case of diphtheria.

OR

- histopathologic diagnosis.

All isolates of *C. diphtheriae*, *C. ulcerans*, and *C. pseudotuberculosis* should be forwarded to CDC.

3.3 Services Available at the Oregon State Public Health Laboratory

OSPHL provides culture of clinical specimens and confirmation of isolates for *Corynebacterium diphtheriae*. Specimens must follow the instructions provided on the OSPHL Lab Test Menu at www.healthoregon.org/labtests. Please notify the OSPHL General Microbiology Section before sending. Complete the OSPHL General Microbiology Test Request Form, available at www.bitly.com/phl-forms and submit with the specimen.

OSPHL forwards isolates to CDC to determine biotype, to be tested for the diphtheria toxin gene by PCR, and toxigenicity testing using the Elek test. Submissions to CDC should first be sent to OSPHL unless otherwise approved by ACDP.

For submissions of *C. ulcerans* and *C. pseudotuberculosis*, please submit two completed forms: 1) OSPHL General Microbiology Test Request form (www.bitly.com/phl-forms) and 2) CDC 50.34 specimen submission form (www.bitly.com/OR-CDC-Testing). Submit to OSPHL for forwarding to CDC.

As soon as diphtheria is suspected, and even if antibiotic therapy has been started (though antibiotics reduce the likelihood of finding it), see that the following are collected using respiratory precautions. This list is intended as a quick reference. Please follow links provided above for complete instructions.

- Swabs from the throat and the nose or nasopharynx. Polyester swabs submitted from multiple sites are preferable. Either cotton or polyester swabs are acceptable for culture, but cotton swabs cannot be used for PCR testing. If possible, an additional swab from beneath

the pharyngeal pseudomembrane.

- If possible, a portion of the adherent pseudomembrane, placed in a screw-top container with a small amount of sterile saline. (This greatly increases the likelihood of culturing *C. diphtheriae*.) This specimen type can only be tested by the CDC.

All submissions should be shipped for overnight delivery. Swabs, pseudomembrane and all isolates need to be sent refrigerated (2–8°C).

Note: Diphtheria is now exceedingly rare in the U.S., and other pathogens can cause a pharyngeal or tonsillar pseudomembrane. These include some streptococci, *Arcanobacterium haemolyticum*, *Candida albicans*, certain fusiform bacteria, Epstein-Barr virus, and cytomegalovirus. Encourage the patient's physician to order appropriate tests to rule out infection by these organisms.

Testing for serum antibody levels is available at commercial laboratories. Testing of serum collected prior to the administration of antitoxin can help assess the probability of the diagnosis. If antibody levels are less than 0.01 IU/mL, immunity is likely to be absent, but a level of greater than 0.1 IU/mL is considered protective, making diphtheria unlikely. Diphtheria antibody levels of 0.01–0.09 IU/mL indicate limited immunity.

Before they get prophylactic antibiotics, collection of clinical specimens from close contacts of a suspect diphtheria case (potential carriers) can aid in the presumptive diagnosis of suspect diphtheria cases who may have received antibiotic therapy prior to specimen collection.

4. ROUTINE CASE INVESTIGATION

Diphtheria is vanishingly rare in the United States; the last case of respiratory disease caused by toxin-producing *C. diphtheriae* was reported in 1997. Initial public health action consists of helping the clinician to obtain and ship appropriate specimens to be tested for toxin-producing *C. diphtheriae*; and of collecting clinical, vaccination, and potential exposure information to assess the likelihood that diphtheria could be present.

Non-respiratory diphtheria may be detected through incidental laboratory testing; create suspect case in Orpheus upon notification of C.

diphtheriae detection from a clinical laboratory. Submit the *C. diphtheriae* isolate to OSPHL for forwarding to CDC. Diphtheria could present as a cutaneous infection, particularly in persons with recent travel to diphtheria-endemic countries. Unless the patient has a membrane of the nose, pharynx, tonsils, or larynx; or appears to be particularly sick (see algorithm on page 10), no case investigation is needed, pending results of toxin testing.

If the organism is non-toxin-producing, reclassify as “No case,” and close the contact investigation. If toxin-producing *C. diphtheriae* is confirmed from any anatomic site, case should be upgraded to “Confirmed,” and investigation of close contacts should continue. Consult with ACDP for all case investigations and investigations of close contacts.

4.1 Identify the Source of Infection

Ask the patient about potential sources of infection, especially travel to or exposures to persons from countries where diphtheria remains prevalent, in the 10 days prior to onset.

4.2 Identify Potentially Exposed Persons

Identify all close contacts, particularly household members and others who were directly exposed to respiratory secretions of the case, and determine their immunization status.

4.3 Environmental Evaluation

None.

5. CONTROLLING FURTHER SPREAD

5.1 Case Management

Vaccination

Diphtheria disease does not always confer immunity. Determine whether case has completed the primary diphtheria toxoid vaccination series and received a booster within the past 10 years, and during convalescence begin any catch-up vaccination needed, using age-appropriate diphtheria toxoid-containing vaccine.

5.2 Contact Management

Identify close contacts, especially household members and other persons directly exposed to oral secretions of the patient. Close contacts include household members and other persons who have spent *at least* 4 hours (cumulatively, within one week of index patient's onset) in close, face-to-face association with the case; **or** anyone directly exposed to the patient's nasopharyngeal secretions (e.g., via kissing, mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, intubation, or nasotracheal suctioning). Vaccination against diphtheria (with Td, Tdap, or DTaP, as appropriate; see Table below) should be recommended for all contacts who are not up to date.

Recommended diphtheria toxoid vaccination for contacts, by previous vaccination history		
<3 doses or unknown	≥3 doses	
	Last dose >5 years previously	Last dose <5 years previously
Immediate dose; complete primary series according to schedule	Immediate booster dose	Children in need of their 4th primary dose or booster dose should be vaccinated; otherwise, vaccination not required

Obtain from each close contact, regardless of their immunization status, both throat and nasal swabs for culture. After specimen collection, each contact should receive antibiotic prophylaxis. Azithromycin, benzathine penicillin or erythromycin are recommended. A single dose of intramuscular benzathine penicillin G (600,000 units for persons <6 years of age, 1.2 million units for persons ≥6 years of age) or a 7- to 10-day course of oral erythromycin (40mg/kg/d for children and 1 g/d for adults) has been recommended. The recommended regimen for azithromycin is: infants aged <6 months: 10 mg/kg per day for 5 days; infants and children aged ≥6 months: 10 mg/kg (maximum 500

mg/dose) on day 1, followed by 5 mg/kg (maximum 250 mg/dose) daily on days 2–5 and adults: 500 mg on day 1, followed by 250 mg daily on days 2–5.

Close contacts should be monitored closely for symptoms of diphtheria for 7–10 days from the time of the last exposure to the suspected patient. Consider administration of diphtheria antitoxin in symptomatic contacts of confirmed cases. If laboratory testing reveals non-toxin-producing or NTTB *C.diphtheriae* in a contact, then symptom monitoring may be discontinued, but a treatment course of antibiotics should be given. If contacts test negative for *C. diphtheriae*, symptom monitoring and antimicrobial prophylaxis can be discontinued.

Treat any confirmed carrier with an adequate course of antibiotic, and repeat cultures at a minimum of 2 weeks after completion of antimicrobial therapy to ensure eradication of the organism. Persons who continue to harbor the organism after treatment with either penicillin or erythromycin should receive an additional 10-day course of erythromycin and should submit samples for follow-up cultures.

5.3 Prevention

Immunization with the combination DTaP (diphtheria & tetanus toxoids-acellular pertussis) vaccine is recommended for all persons at least 6 weeks old but less than 7 years of age without contraindications. The primary DTaP series consists of three doses, administered at ages 2, 4, and 6 months, with a minimum interval of 4 weeks between doses. The fourth (first booster) dose is recommended at 15–18 months of age to maintain adequate immunity during pre-school years.

The fourth dose should be administered at least 6 months after the third. If the interval from the third dose is 6 months or greater and the child is unlikely to return for a visit at the recommended age, the fourth dose of DTaP may be administered as early as age 12 months. The fifth (second booster) dose is recommended for children aged 4–6 years to confer continued protection against disease during the early years of schooling. A fifth dose is not necessary if the fourth dose in the series is administered on or after the fourth birthday.

Adolescents 11–18 years of age should receive a single booster dose of Tdap instead of Td for immunization against tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis if they have completed the recommended childhood DTP/DTaP vaccination series.

Thereafter, routine booster doses of Td vaccine should be given at 10-year intervals. Adolescents and adults who have never been vaccinated against diphtheria should receive a primary series of three doses of Td/Tdap. The first two doses should be administered at least 4 weeks apart, and the third dose 6–12 months after the second dose. For added protection against pertussis, Tdap should be one of the doses in the 3-dose primary series, preferably the first one. Td is preferred to TT for adults as part of wound management if the last dose of Td was received ≥ 5 years earlier.

For added protection against pertussis, adults ≥ 19 years of age should receive a single dose of Tdap to replace a single routine booster dose of Td, if they received their last dose of Td 10 or more years earlier and have not previously received a dose of Tdap.

GLOSSARY (AS NEEDED)

REFERENCES

1. Gubler J, Huber-Schneider C, Gruner E, Altwegg M. An outbreak of nontoxigenic *Corynebacterium diphtheriae* infection: Single bacterial clone causing invasive infection among Swiss drug users. *Clin Infect Dis* 1998;27:1295–8.
2. CDC. Expanded Access Investigational New Drug (IND) Application Protocol: Use of Diphtheria Antitoxin (DAT) for Possible Diphtheria Cases. Version 10.0; last reviewed December 13, 2022. Available at www.cdc.gov/diphtheria/downloads/protocol.pdf. Accessed 2 Feb 2023.
3. Acosta AM, Bampoe VD. Chapter 1: Diphtheria. In: CDC. *Manual for the Surveillance of Vaccine-Preventable Diseases*. Available at www.cdc.gov/vaccines/pubs/surv-manual/chpt01-dip.html. Accessed 2 Feb 2023.

UPDATE LOG

June 2026: Updated reporting of nontoxigenic isolates to within one public health working day. (Juventila Liko, Howard Chiou)

February 2023: Description of Illness, Suspect Case Definition, Case Investigation, and Contact investigation updated. (Corey Pierce)

February 2022: Case definitions updated. (Juventila Liko)

March 2021: Reporting period updated to “immediately” reportable. (Juventila Liko)

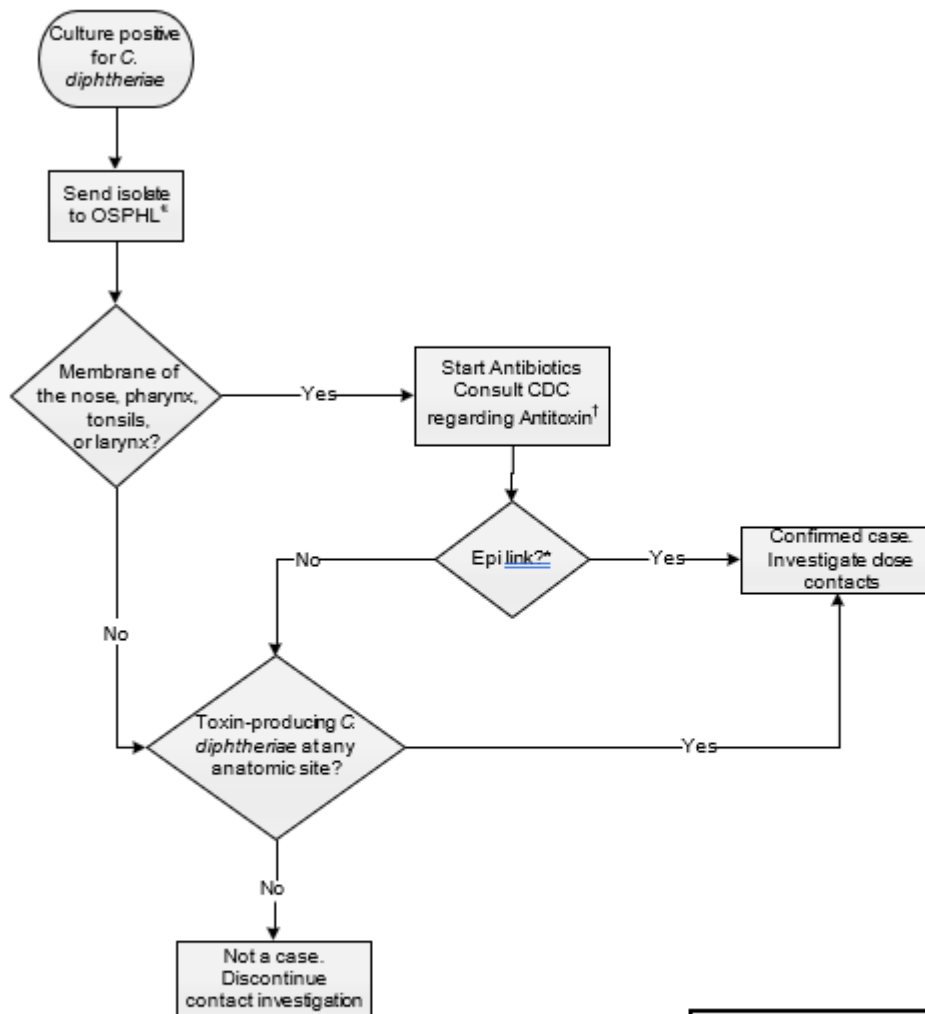
March 2017: Suspect case definition added. Case and contact management clarified. Reference for diphtheria antitoxin added. (Juventila Liko)

December 2015: Updated into new template. (Leslie Byster)

January 2012: Created (Paul Cieslak and Juventila Liko)

ACDP Recommendations

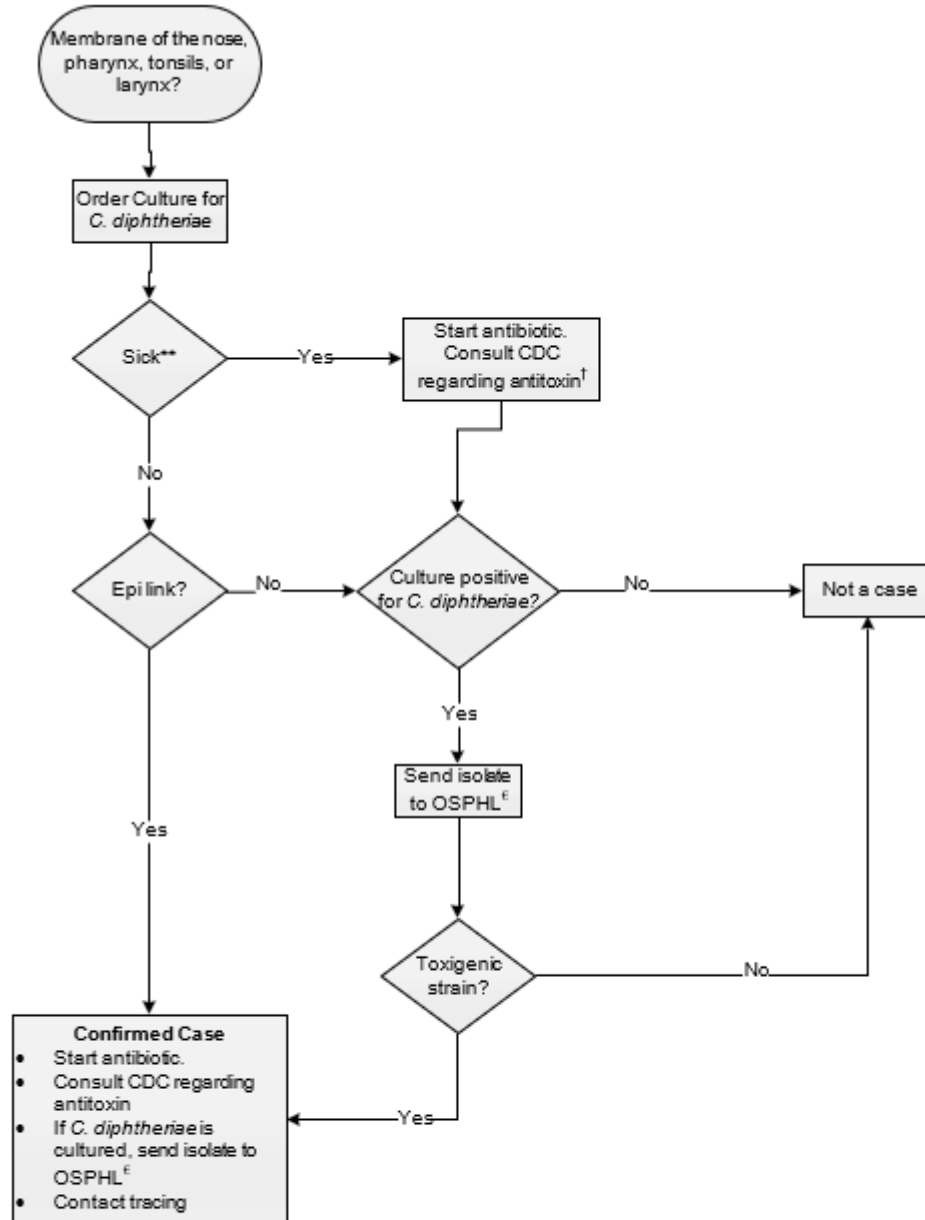
How to Manage a Suspect Case of Diphtheria



[€] For referral to CDC for toxin testing

^{*} Recent contact (< 2 weeks) with a diphtheria case.

[†] But ultimately, defer to clinician judgment



- Recent contact (< 2 weeks) with a diphtheria case.
- Toxic-appearing, bull neck, airway obstruction, myocarditis, etc.
- ^ε For referral to CDC for toxin testing
- [†] But ultimately, defer to clinician judgment

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