Diphtheria

The Disease

Diphtheria, caused by the Corynebacterium diphtheriae bacterium, is a potentially serious illness involving the upper respiratory tract. It is spread by coughing and sneezing or by direct contact with wounds or items soiled by infected persons. There are various infecting strains, some (toxin producing) cause more severe illness affecting the nerves and the heart.

Where is it found?

Diphtheria is found in all regions of the globe. Early last century in Australia, more deaths were caused by diphtheria than any other infectious disease but, with the introduction of suitable vaccines, it virtually disappeared. These days there are rare imported cases, usually from less developed countries.

Symptoms

The symptoms usually start with a mild fever, sore throat, problems swallowing, generally feeling unwell (malaise) and a loss of appetite. After about 2-3 days a firm, fleshy, grey and sticky coating develops in the throat, which starts to bleed if an attempt is made to remove it. If left untreated more serious problems occur such as suffocation, heart & kidney damage and severe nerve damage.

Prevention

The risk to travellers is generally low. Australian children are vaccinated against diphtheria as part of the standard immunisation schedule and the last dose is given at 11-15 years of age. In adults, a booster to the childhood series is recommended every 10 years if at risk, in combination with Tetanus.

Type

In Adults: Diphtheria toxoid given in combination with Tetanus or Tetanus/Pertussis (ADT, Adacel /Boostrix) or Tetanus/ Pertussis/ Polio (Adacel Polio/ Boostrix IPV).
In Children under 10 years: Diphtheria toxoid given in combination with Tetanus and others. (InfanrixHexa, Infanrix IPV, Pediacel, Quadracel, Tripacel)

Standard Schedule

Primary series is given from 6-8 weeks of age. 3 doses are administered at least 4 weeks apart, with boosters at around 4 years of age and again at 12-17 years of age.

A single booster of tetanus/diphtheria-containing vaccine (preferably also with pertussis) is given at 50 years of age. However boosters are administered every 10 years for travellers who are going to countries where health services are difficult to access, or every 5 years for those travellers who are partaking in adventurous activities such as mountaineering, bike riding, rock climbing and caving.
Level of Protection

- Over 95%

Potential side effects

- Pain, redness or swelling at injection site as well as transient fever, headache and malaise.
- Acute allergic reactions occur in 1 per 1 million doses
- In young babies, decreased appetite, fever and crying. In children who received DTP (tetanus, diphtheria, whooping cough) as their primary vaccination, boosting with the same vaccine produced extensive limb swelling in 2% of recipients.

As with all vaccines, there is a small risk of allergic reaction.

More information on diphtheria and related health tips will be available during your Travelvax consultation. Call 1300 360 164 for the location of your nearest clinic.