

About...Tetanus

What is tetanus?

Tetanus, commonly called lockjaw, is a bacterial infection that affects the nervous system. The bacteria causing this infection produce a toxin (poison) that cause muscles to tighten or “lock”. Tetanus is extremely rare in the United States but is still common in some countries. Tetanus is a serious infection and may be fatal.

What are the symptoms of tetanus?

A common first sign of tetanus is muscular stiffness in the jaw, followed by stiffness of the neck, difficulty in swallowing, rigidity of abdominal muscles, muscle spasms, sweating, and fever. Complications from tetanus may include: spasms of the respiratory muscles, fractures of the spine or long bones, high blood pressure, abnormal heartbeat, clotting of the blood vessels of the lung, pneumonia, coma, and death.

How is tetanus spread?

Tetanus bacteria are commonly found in the environment, especially in soil contaminated with manure. Tetanus bacteria are usually introduced into the body through a puncture wound contaminated with soil or feces (stool) of animals or humans. The bacteria may also be introduced through contaminated cuts, scrapes, and burns and by contaminated street drugs that are injected. Tetanus may occasionally follow surgical procedures performed under unhygienic conditions. Tetanus is not spread from person to person.

How do I know if I have tetanus?

See your health care provider if you suffer a wound, especially a puncture wound, that appears dirty or contaminated or appears infected: red, swollen, hot to the touch, and painful. Depending on the date of your last vaccination, your health care provider may recommend a booster dose of tetanus vaccine.

How is tetanus treated?

Wounds should be thoroughly cleaned as soon as possible after an injury. If you have not had a tetanus shot in the previous 10 years, a single booster dose should be administered on the day of injury. For severe wounds, a booster may be given if more than five years have elapsed since the last dose. Your health care provider may also recommend tetanus immune globulin (TIG), antitoxin, or antibiotics.

How can tetanus be prevented?

Several vaccines are available to prevent tetanus. Tetanus vaccine is combined with diphtheria and pertussis vaccines in different amounts for children and adults. Adults should receive routine tetanus-diphtheria (Td) or Tdap vaccine, which also protects against pertussis (whooping cough). Children should receive the recommended doses of DTaP, Tdap, DT, or Td vaccines. Your health care provider can determine which vaccine is right for you.

For additional information on tetanus, please visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Web site at: <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/tetanus/default.htm>.

This page was last reviewed on July 6, 2007



Indiana State Department of Health