

Tetanus (Lockjaw)

What is tetanus?

Tetanus, also called lockjaw, is a disease caused by bacteria that affects the body's muscles and nerves.

What are the symptoms of tetanus?

Symptoms of tetanus include muscle spasms in the jaw, difficulty swallowing, and stiffness or pain in the muscles of the neck, shoulders, or back. The spasms can spread to the muscles of the abdomen, upper arms, and thighs.

What health problems does tetanus cause?

Most healthy children and adults recover from tetanus though the disease causes a serious prolonged illness. Approximately 11 percent of reported cases of tetanus are fatal. In the U.S., where 50 or fewer cases of tetanus occur each year, deaths are more likely to occur in persons 60 years of age and older. Other possible health problems from tetanus include spasm of the vocal cords, fractures of the spine or long bones, high blood pressure, infection, lung clots, and pneumonia.

How is tetanus diagnosed?

Symptoms usually confirm the diagnosis of tetanus. There is no laboratory test for tetanus.

Who gets tetanus?

Tetanus can occur in people who have a skin or deep tissue wound or puncture and who are not up-to-date on their tetanus vaccinations.

Is there a vaccine for tetanus?

Yes. The tetanus vaccination is usually combined with diphtheria and/or pertussis (DTaP, DT, Tdap, or Td).

- Children should get 5 doses of the DTaP vaccine before age 7.
 - These are usually given at 2, 4, 6, and 15-18 months of age and 4 - 6 years of age.
- Tdap is given to children at 11-12 years of age.
- Adults should get a booster every 10 years. Get one dose of Tdap vaccine if you did not get it as an adolescent. Then, get Td (tetanus-diphtheria) vaccine every 10 years after that.
- Pregnant women should get Tdap during each pregnancy, preferably between 27 and 36 weeks.

Talk to your health care provider to make sure you are up-to-date on your tetanus vaccinations.

How is tetanus spread?

Tetanus cannot be spread from person to person. The only way to get tetanus is from a skin wound that becomes contaminated by the tetanus bacteria, which is often found in soil.

The period between exposure to the bacteria and onset of illness is usually 8 days, but can range from 3 to 21 days.

When and for how long is a person able to spread tetanus?

Tetanus cannot be spread from person to person.

What can be done to prevent tetanus?

Vaccination is the best way to prevent tetanus. Widespread vaccination against tetanus is critical to controlling the disease.

Floods and Tetanus: Do we need to get any shots?

There is usually no increased risk of getting vaccine-preventable diseases, like tetanus or hepatitis A, during a flood. However, those working in clean up may be wounded and exposed to soil that contains the bacteria that causes tetanus. Most people get a tetanus shot that is combined with vaccines for diphtheria and pertussis. Children should have a basic series of four tetanus shots at 2-18 months of age and should receive booster shots at 4-6 years and 11-12 years. Adults should get a tetanus booster shot every 10 years.

Ask your doctor if you should get a tetanus shot if you get a puncture wound and you:

- Haven't had a tetanus shot in the last five years,
- You can't remember when you got your last tetanus shot,
- You never got a basic childhood series of at least three shots.

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