

Tetanus

Information for the Public



What is tetanus?

Tetanus is an infection caused by a bacteria called *Clostridium tetani*. When the bacteria invade the body, they produce a poison (toxin) that causes painful muscle contractions. Another name for tetanus is "lockjaw". It often causes a person's neck and jaw muscles to lock, making it hard to open the mouth or swallow. CDC recommends vaccines for infants, children, teens, and adults to prevent tetanus.

Tetanus is different from other vaccine-preventable diseases because it does not spread from person to person. The bacteria are usually found in soil, dust, and manure and enter the body through breaks in the skin—usually cuts or puncture wounds caused by contaminated objects.

Today, tetanus is uncommon in the United States, with an average of 30 reported cases each year. Nearly all cases of tetanus are among people who have never received a tetanus vaccine, or adults who don't stay up to date on their 10-year booster shots.

How do you get Tetanus?

The spores can get into the body through broken skin, usually through injuries from contaminated objects. Certain breaks in the skin are more likely to get infected with the bacteria. These include:

- Wounds contaminated with dirt, poop (feces), or spit (saliva)
- Wounds caused by an object puncturing the skin (puncture wounds), like a nail or needle
- Burns
- Crush injuries
- Injuries with dead tissue

Rarely, tetanus has been linked to breaks in the skin caused by:

- Clean superficial wounds (when only the topmost layer of skin is scraped off)
- Surgical procedures
- Insect bites
- Dental infections
- Compound fractures (a break in the bone where it is exposed)
- Chronic sores and infections
- Intravenous (IV) drug use
- Intramuscular injections (shots given in a muscle)

What are symptoms of Tetanus?

The first sign is most commonly spasms of the muscles of the jaw, or "lockjaw." Other symptoms of tetanus include:

- Jaw cramping
- Sudden, involuntary muscle tightening (muscle spasms) — often in the stomach
- Painful muscle stiffness all over the body
- Trouble swallowing

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- Jerking or staring (seizures)
- Headache
- Fever and sweating
- Changes in blood pressure and a fast heart rate

The incubation period (time from exposure to illness) is usually between 3 and 21 days with an average of 10 days, although it may range from one day to several months, depending on the kind of wound. Most cases occur within 14 days. In general, shorter incubation periods are seen with more heavily contaminated wounds, more serious disease, and a worse outcome.

How is Tetanus diagnosed?

Doctors can diagnose tetanus by examining the patient and looking for certain signs and symptoms. There are no blood tests that can confirm tetanus.

What is the treatment for Tetanus?

Tetanus is a medical emergency requiring:

- Care in the hospital
- Immediate treatment with medicine called human tetanus immune globulin (TIG)
- Aggressive wound care
- Drugs to control muscle spasms
- Antibiotics
- Tetanus vaccination

Depending on how serious the infection is, a machine to help you breathe may be required.

Can Tetanus be prevented?

Yes, through vaccination. Being up to date with the tetanus vaccine is the best tool to prevent tetanus. Protection from vaccines, as well as a prior infection, do not last a lifetime. This means that if you had tetanus or were vaccinated before, you still need to get vaccinated regularly to keep a high level of protection against this serious disease. Tetanus vaccines are recommended for people of all ages, with booster shots throughout life.

Immediate and good wound care can also help prevent infection. Best practices include:

- Don't delay first aid of even minor, non-infected wounds like blisters, scrapes, or any break in the skin.
- Wash hands often with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand rub if washing is not possible.
- Consult your doctor if you have concerns and need further advice.

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