FACT SHEET: TETANUS

May 2025

WHAT IS TETANUS?

Tetanus, also known as "lockjaw," is caused by the bacteria Clostridium tetani, which forms spores found in soil, dust, and manure. These spores develop into bacteria in the body and produce tetanus toxin (tetanospasmin). The bacteria are heat-sensitive and cannot survive in the presence of oxygen, but the spores are resistant to heat and antiseptics. Tetanus peaks during the summer in temperate climates and is present year-round in tropical climates, with a potential increase during the wet season in some areas.

WHO CAN GET TETANUS?

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

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF TETANUS?

Symptoms of tetanus include the following:

- Generalized tetanus: the first sign is jaw cramping and tightening of muscles (“lockjaw” or trismus)
- Followed by stiffness of the neck, difficulty swallowing, and rigidity of abdominal muscles
- Fever, sweating, and jerking or staring (seizures) that continues for 3 to 4 weeks (complete recovery may take months)

WHAT ARE THE COMPLICATIONS OF TETANUS?

Serious health problems that can happen because of tetanus include the following:

- Laryngospasm (uncontrolled/involuntary tightening of the vocal cords)
- Fractures (broken bones)
- Nosocomial infections (infections acquired by patients during a hospital visit)
- Elevated blood pressure (hypertension) and /or abnormal heart rhythm
- Pulmonary embolism (blockage of the main artery of the lung or one of its branches by a blood clot that has traveled from elsewhere in the body through the bloodstream).
- Aspiration pneumonia (a lung infection that develops by breathing in foreign materials).
- Death due to the direct effects of tetanus toxin

HOW SOON DO SYMPTOMS APPEAR?

Symptoms usually begin 8 days after exposure (range, 1-21 days).

HOW IS TETANUS IS SPREAD?

Tetanus is not contagious from person-to-person. 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 tetanus bacteria. These include the following:

- Wounds contaminated with dirt, feces, or saliva
- Wounds caused by an object puncturing the skin (puncture wounds), like a nail or needle
- Burns, crush injuries, and injuries with dead tissues.

IS THERE A VACCINE FOR TETANUS?

Yes. Tetanus vaccines are recommended throughout your lifetime. There are four types of vaccines used to protect against tetanus, all of which are combined with vaccines for other diseases: DTaP, Tdap, DT, and Td. A 5-dose DTaP series is given at 2, 4, and 6 months, 15-18 months, and 4-6 years. A single dose of Tdap is recommended between 11 and 12 years of age. Tdap and Td are used as booster shots every 10 years. Tdap can also be used as a single dose for adolescents who missed the 11–12-year dose, or for those who may have close contact with infants. TD vaccine may be used to complete the primary series, as recommended by the CDC when a child has a contraindication to pertussis.

HOW IS TETANUS TREATED?

Tetanus is a medical emergency that requires immediate treatment with medicine called human tetanus immune globulin (TIG), aggressive wound care, medicine to control muscle spasms, antibiotics and tetanus vaccination.

HOW CAN PEOPLE PROTECT THEMSELVES AGAINST TETANUS?

Vaccination and good wound care are important to help prevent tetanus infection.

WANT MOrRE INFORMATION?

Information about tetanus and other related health topics can be found cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please visit dchealth.dc.gov or call (202) 442-5865.

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