

Tetanus

What is tetanus?

Tetanus, commonly called lockjaw, is a disease caused by the bacterium *Clostridium tetani* that affects the nervous system. As a result of widespread immunization, tetanus is now a rare disease.

Who gets tetanus?

Anyone may get tetanus if they have not been appropriately immunized against it. In the United States, most cases occur in older people and in agricultural workers for whom contact with animal manure is more likely and immunization is inadequate.

How is tetanus spread?

Tetanus is introduced into the body, usually through a puncture wound dirty with soil or animal or human feces. The bacteria may also be introduced through cuts, scrapes, burns and unnoticed wounds, or by infected, contaminated street drugs. Tetanus may occasionally follow surgical procedures performed under unhygienic conditions. It is not spread from person to person.

Where are the tetanus bacteria found?

C. tetani is present throughout the environment and is commonly found in soil contaminated with manure.

What are the symptoms of tetanus?

A common first sign of tetanus is muscular stiffness in the jaw (lockjaw), followed by stiffness of the neck, difficulty in swallowing, rigidity of abdominal muscles, spasms, sweating and fever.

How soon after infection do symptoms occur?

Signs and symptoms occur from 3-21 days after infection, although it may occur as soon as 1 day after infection depending on the type and location of the wound; the average is 10 days. Shorter incubation periods are associated with more heavily contaminated wounds.

Does past infection with tetanus make a person immune?

Recovery from tetanus may not result in immunity. Second attacks can occur, and immunization is indicated after recovery.

What is the treatment for tetanus?

Wounds should be thoroughly cleaned. If the patient has not had a tetanus shot in the previous ten years, a single booster injection 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. Tetanus immune globulin (TIG), antitoxin or antibiotics may be given by your healthcare provider.

What are the complications associated with tetanus?

The most common complication associated with tetanus includes spasms of the respiratory muscles causing breathing problems. Other complications include fractures of the spine or long bones, hypertension, abnormal heartbeat, coma, generalized infection, clotting in the blood vessels of the lung, pneumonia, and death.

Is there a vaccine for tetanus?

Yes. Tetanus vaccine, (usually given in combination with diphtheria and acellular pertussis vaccines and called DTaP), is given at two, four, six and twelve to fifteen months of age, and between four and six years of age. Persons who are seven years of age or older should receive either Tdap (tetanus, diphtheria, and acellular pertussis vaccine) or Td (tetanus and diphtheria) every ten years. Ask your healthcare provider which vaccine is appropriate for you.