



TETANUS (Lockjaw)

What is TETANUS?

Tetanus, commonly called lockjaw, is a serious, often fatal, bacterial disease that affects muscles and nerves. Death can result from severe breathing difficulties or heart abnormalities.

How does someone get tetanus?

In unvaccinated persons, tetanus is contracted through a cut or deep wound that becomes infected. The bacteria that causes tetanus naturally occurs in the soil. Any wound or cut contaminated with the soil, such as a puncture wound, can provide a suitable environment for the bacteria. The bacteria infect the wound and produce a toxin that spreads through the blood, causing severe muscle spasms, paralysis and frequently death. Tetanus is not transmitted person to person.

Who can get tetanus?

Anyone who gets a wound or cut is at risk if they are not properly immunized against tetanus.

What are the symptoms?

A common first sign of tetanus is muscular stiffness in the jaw (lockjaw), followed by neck stiffness, difficulty swallowing, muscle spasms, sweating and fever. The most common type of tetanus is the generalized form, indicated by lockjaw (spasms of the jaw muscles). Spasms can continue for three to four weeks. Complete recovery may take months.

How soon do symptoms appear?

On average, it takes about ten days for symptoms to start. Symptoms can begin as early as one day after exposure to several months. Shorter incubation periods are associated with more heavily contaminated wounds.

How is tetanus treated?

Immunization is the most important treatment for tetanus. Active immunization with tetanus toxoid should begin as soon as the person's condition has stabilized. Persons with an uncertain history of prior immunization against tetanus and those with more severe wounds may need tetanus immune globulin (TIG) as well as tetanus toxoid. If disease develops, supportive care and therapy to control severe spasms may be necessary.

How do I prevent the disease?

An effective vaccine called tetanus toxoid has been available for many years. It is contained in the DTaP (diphtheria, tetanus, acellular pertussis), Tdap (tetanus, diphtheria, acellular pertussis) and Td (tetanus, diphtheria) vaccines. A tetanus booster shot is recommended every 10 years after the completion of an initial series of three doses.