



TETANUS

What is tetanus?

Tetanus or lockjaw is an acute, often fatal disease, caused by a toxin produced by the bacteria, *Clostridium tetani*.

Who gets tetanus?

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

How is tetanus spread?

The bacterium which causes tetanus is very common in soil. The bacteria can grow in any wound or cut contaminated with soil and not open to the air, such as a puncture wound or even a pin prick. This disease is usually acquired when a person who has not been immunized acquires such a wound by stepping on a dirty nail or being cut by a dirty tool. The bacteria infect the wound and produce a toxin that spreads through the blood, causing severe muscle spasms, paralysis, and frequently, death. While the bacterium cannot survive in the presence of oxygen, the spores are resistant to heat and the usual antiseptics.

What are the symptoms of tetanus?

The most common type of tetanus is the generalized form. The first sign is lockjaw or spasms of the muscles of the jaw. It is then followed by stiffness of the neck, difficulty in swallowing, and rigidity of the abdominal muscles. Spasms may occur frequently and may continue for three to four weeks. Complete recovery may take months.

How soon do symptoms appear?

It usually takes about eight days for symptoms to start, with a range of three to 21 days

Should an infected person be excluded from work or school?

There is no person-to-person mode of transmission of tetanus, so it is not necessary to exclude an infected person from work or school. Only exclude individuals with tetanus if their symptoms prohibit participation.

What is the treatment for tetanus?

Wounds should be cleaned of dead tissue and foreign material should be removed. Tetanus Immune Globulin (TIG) is recommended for individuals with tetanus. Active immunization with tetanus toxoid should begin as soon as the person's condition has stabilized.



Frequently Asked Questions

Antibiotic prophylaxis against tetanus is not useful; proper immunization is more important. If an individual has an uncertain history of prior immunization against tetanus, he/she needs tetanus immune globulin (TIG) as well as tetanus toxoid.

What can a person or community do to prevent the spread of tetanus?

Good wound care and vaccination against tetanus are important to help prevent tetanus infection.

Being up to date with tetanus vaccine is the best tool to prevent tetanus. Protection from vaccines, as well as a prior infection, do not last a lifetime. Even if an individual previously had tetanus or got the vaccine, regular tetanus vaccinations are needed to keep a high level of protection against this serious disease.

Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/tetanus/index.html>