

Tetanus- Factsheet

What is tetanus?

Tetanus, commonly called lockjaw, is a bacterial disease that affects the nervous system. This disease is rare in the United States.

What are the symptoms of tetanus?

Symptoms may appear beginning 1 to 21 days following exposure, but usually appear 8-10 days after exposure. The first sign of tetanus is usually muscular stiffness in the jaw (lockjaw). This may be followed by stiffness of the neck, difficulty swallowing, rigidity of abdominal muscles, and spasms.

How is tetanus spread?

The tetanus bacteria live throughout the environment and are commonly found in soil, especially soil that has been “dirtied” or contaminated with manure. The tetanus bacteria enter the body through a wound. Although a common misconception, the wound does not need to be caused by rusty metal for a person to be at risk for tetanus. Tetanus is not spread from person to person.

How long are people contagious?

Persons with tetanus are not contagious; it is not spread from person to person.

Who gets tetanus?

Persons who are not up to date on their tetanus vaccines are the most likely to get the disease. Tetanus occurs more often in older people who have not received adequate booster doses of vaccine. Farm or dairy workers, who have contact with manure, are also at a higher risk of getting tetanus.

What is available to treat or prevent tetanus?

Clean wounds promptly and thoroughly. Dead tissue should be removed by a health care professional. If the patient has not had a tetanus booster in the previous 10 years or has not completed at least three doses of tetanus vaccine in their lifetime, they should receive vaccine as soon as possible. For severe, deep, or dirty wounds, a booster should be given if the patient has not completed at least three doses of tetanus vaccine in their lifetime, or if they last received a tetanus booster more than 5 years ago. In some cases, tetanus immune globulin (TIG) may also be needed.

Do infected people need to be kept home from school, work or daycare?

No. People with tetanus may go to school, work, or daycare when they feel well enough.

How can I protect myself and my family from getting tetanus?

Keep up to date on immunizations. DTaP is a combination vaccine used to build immunity to tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis. The recommended schedule for this vaccine is five doses at 2, 4, 6 and 15-18 months of age, with the fifth dose given between 4 and 6 years of age (usually before beginning kindergarten). Immunity wanes with time, so adolescents should get a booster of Tdap around 11-12 years old, and everyone (including adults) should keep up on boosters (Td or Tdap) every 10 years to make sure they stay protected.

Clean wounds immediately after they occur and keep clean until completely healed. Seek medical care if the wound is deep, severe, dirty or difficult to clean, or is a puncture wound (such as stepping on a nail).