

TETANUS FACT SHEET

What is tetanus?

Tetanus (commonly known as “lockjaw”) is an infection caused by the bacteria called *Clostridium tetani*. Spores of tetanus bacteria are everywhere in the environment, including soil, dust, and manure. The spores develop into bacteria when they enter the body and produce a poison (toxin).

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:

- Jaw cramping and tightening of muscles (“lockjaw”)
- Sudden, involuntary muscle tightening (muscle spasms) — often in the stomach
- Painful muscle stiffness all over the body
- Trouble swallowing
- Jerking or staring (seizures)
- Headache
- Fever and sweating
- Changes in blood pressure and a fast heart rate

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

- Uncontrolled/involuntary tightening of the vocal cords (laryngospasm)
- Broken bones (fractures)
- Infections acquired by patients during a hospital visit
- 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 (pulmonary embolism)
- A lung infection that develops by breathing in foreign materials (aspiration pneumonia)
- Breathing difficulty, possibly leading to death

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually begin three to 21 days after exposure to the bacteria (average 10 days).

How is tetanus spread?

Tetanus does not spread 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, poop, or saliva
- Wounds caused by an object puncturing the skin (puncture wounds), like a nail or needle
- Burns
- Crush injuries
- Injuries with dead tissue

Is there a vaccine for tetanus?

Yes. Tetanus vaccines are recommended throughout your life. 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.

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.

Where can I get more information?

Information about tetanus and other related health topics can be found at www.cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please visit www.doh.dc.gov or call (202) 442-9371.