

Tetanus is a disease of the nervous system caused by a toxin produced by the bacterium *Clostridium tetani*. This bacterium produces spores, which are resistant cells able to survive in the soil for many years. Tetanus is a notifiable condition

### **How tetanus is spread?**

Bacteria causing tetanus are found in soil and human and animal faeces. The bacteria may contaminate puncture wounds, cuts, burns and complicated fractures. The initial wound is often quite trivial and may not have received medical attention.

### **Signs and symptoms**

Symptoms include painful muscle spasms, initially of the muscles of the neck and jaw (lockjaw), and later of the muscles of the trunk. Tetanus is a very serious disease and is frequently fatal, particularly in infants and the elderly. It has become more common in people who use intravenous drugs.

### **Diagnosis**

Diagnosis is made based on a clinical presentation.

### **Incubation period**

(Time between becoming infected and developing symptoms)

1 day to several months, with an average of 10 days.

### **Infectious period**

(Time during which an infected person can infect others)

Person-to-person spread does not occur.

### **Treatment**

Treatment requires the administration of tetanus antitoxin and antibiotics. Often prolonged treatment in the intensive care unit of a hospital is necessary.

## **Prevention**

Exclusion of people with tetanus from childcare, preschool, school and work is not necessary. Protection against tetanus is provided by a tetanus-containing vaccine which is given in combination with other vaccines as part of routine childhood immunization. The first dose of tetanus vaccine, in combination with other vaccines, is now recommended to be given at 6 weeks of age. A tetanus booster is recommended at 4 years of age and between 12 and 15 years of age. A booster is also recommended at age 50 years and prior to travelling overseas, if one has not been given in the previous 10 years.

For adolescents and adults, the combined diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis (dTpa) vaccine is preferred, if not given previously, as it will also provide protection against whooping cough (pertussis).