

Tetanus

What is tetanus?

Tetanus, often referred to as “lockjaw”, is a serious illness where the person experiences severe muscle spasms. Tetanus is caused by *Clostridium tetani* bacteria that produce a toxin (poison) in the body that attacks the nervous system, and can cause death in some cases.

How does tetanus spread?

People get tetanus from the environment, not from other people. Tetanus bacteria are found in soil and have also been detected in the intestines of animals and humans.

Tetanus bacteria can enter the body through a puncture wound, a cut in the skin, injection drug use with a contaminated needle, a severe burn or an animal bite. Although an injury from a rusty nail is often blamed for tetanus, it is the tetanus bacteria on the nail, not the rust, which cause the disease.

What are the symptoms of tetanus?

Symptoms of tetanus typically appear 10 days after infection by the bacteria, and include irritability, headache, fever, and spasms of the jaw muscles. These are followed by intense, painful muscle contractions in the neck, arms, legs, and stomach. Muscle spasms occur frequently and last for several minutes.

The incubation period is three to 21 days, although it may range from one day to several months. In general, shorter incubation periods are associated with more heavily contaminated wounds, more severe disease, and a worse prognosis.

How can tetanus be prevented?

Tetanus can be prevented with a vaccine. For children less than seven years of age, routine vaccine formulations contain tetanus toxoid in combination with diphtheria toxoid, acellular pertussis, inactivated polio and *H. influenzae type b* antigens. For adolescents aged 14 to 16 years, vaccination with tetanus toxoid, diphtheria toxoid and acellular pertussis is recommended. Adults may receive tetanus vaccination using tetanus toxoid, in combination with diphtheria toxoid, or combined with diphtheria toxoid and acellular pertussis. Booster doses are recommended every 10 years thereafter for teens and adults.

What is the treatment for tetanus?

Thoroughly clean the wound or injury and see a physician for treatment. Tetanus toxoid and/or tetanus immune globulin may be administered based on your immunization status. Antibiotics may also be prescribed in some cases to prevent the bacteria from multiplying at the wound site.

For further information, please call:
York Region Health Connection 1-800-361-5653
TTY 1-866-252-9933 or visit www.york.ca