Tetanus Fact Sheet

Tetanus is an infection caused by a type of bacteria

Tetanus is an infection caused by the bacterium *Clostridium tetani*. Tetanus is uncommon, but it is a very serious disease that requires immediate treatment in a hospital.

Tetanus infection occurs when bacteria enter through cuts or wounds

Tetanus is not spread from person to person. Spores of the bacterium are found in the environment, including in dirt and dust. The spores can get into the body through broken skin, like a cut or a puncture wound. These spores grow and start producing a toxin when they enter the body.

Some factors put you at greater risk of tetanus infection

You are at greater risk of tetanus if you have never been vaccinated against tetanus, are 80 years or older, have diabetes, have a weakened immune system, or use injection drugs.

Symptoms of tetanus include:

- Locking of the jaw
- Sudden, involuntary muscle spasms (especially in the jaw, neck, and trunk) and seizures
- Painful muscle stiffness all over the body
- Trouble swallowing
- Headache
- Fever and sweating

Symptoms typically occur between 3 and 21 days (average 8 days) after exposure to the bacterium. Tetanus can lead to serious health problems, such as pulmonary embolism and pneumonia. In the United States, about 10% of cases are fatal.

See a doctor immediately for treatment

Tetanus is a medical emergency that requires immediate treatment. There are no lab tests that can confirm tetanus. Doctors diagnose tetanus based on clinical signs and symptoms, and by considering risk factors, such as vaccination status and recent history of cuts, punctures, or other injuries.

Tetanus is often treated with a medicine called human tetanus immune globulin (TIG), which helps provide immediate, short-term protection against the tetanus toxin. Other treatments may include antibiotics, tetanus vaccine, drugs to control muscle spasms and seizures, and mechanical ventilation for people with severe breathing difficulty.

Vaccination is the best way to protect against tetanus

DTaP (diphtheria, tetanus, and acellular pertussis), Td (tetanus, diphtheria), and Tdap (tetanus, diphtheria, and acellular pertussis) vaccines all protect against tetanus. Children need five doses of DTaP between ages 2 months and 6 years, and a Tdap booster at age 11 or 12 years. Adults should get a booster dose every 10 years after their primary series has been completed.

Care for wounds to prevent infection

Proper wound care can help prevent tetanus and many other infections. It is important to immediately clean even minor wounds and apply clean, dry bandages. Wash your hands with soap and water before and after treating wounds or handling bandages.

Consult your healthcare provider if you have concerns about your wound or if:
- Your wound is severe
- You have a deep puncture wound (e.g., after stepping on a nail)
- Your wound contains dirt, soil, feces, or saliva
- Your wound contains dead tissue, such as burns, fractures, or crush injuries