

Tetanus

FACTSHEET

(Lockjaw)

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
Division of Epidemiology, Disease Surveillance and Investigation
899 N. Capitol Street, NE, Suite 580
Washington, DC 20002
202-442-9371 • Fax 202-442-8060
www.doh.dc.gov

What is Tetanus?

Tetanus, commonly called lockjaw, is a bacterial infection that affects the nervous system. Due to widespread immunization, tetanus is now a rare disease. If tetanus occurs it can be a very serious disease and can lead to death in some cases.

Who gets Tetanus?

Tetanus occurs more often in older people and in agricultural workers where contact with animal manure is more likely and immunization is inadequate.

What are the symptoms of Tetanus?

A common first sign of tetanus is muscular stiffness in the jaw (lockjaw), followed by stiffness of the neck and abdomen, and difficulty swallowing. These symptoms are followed by fever, elevated blood pressure, and severe muscle spasms.

How is Tetanus spread?

The bacteria that cause tetanus enter the body through a break in the skin. The bacteria are present in the environment and are commonly found in soil contaminated with manure. Tetanus is not spread from person-to-person.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The time between becoming infected and developing symptoms is usually eight days, but may range from three days to three weeks. The length of time it takes to develop symptoms is associated with the degree of wound contamination.

Is a person with Tetanus contagious?

No, a person with tetanus is not contagious.

How is Tetanus treated?

Tetanus is treated in several ways. The wound should be thoroughly cleaned and dead skin around the wound removed. Tetanus immune globulin, antitoxin or antibiotics may be given if the person has not been previously immunized with a series of at least three doses of toxoid.

Is there a vaccine for Tetanus?

An effective vaccine called tetanus toxoid has been available for many years. Tetanus toxoid is given in combination with diphtheroid toxoid and pertussis vaccine (DPT) or (DTaP) to infants at two, four, six, and 15 months of age, and a booster dose between the age of four and six. A tetanus booster shot is recommended every ten years.

Can Tetanus be prevented?

Tetanus can be prevented through vaccination against the disease.

Want more information?

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

