



Indiana State Department of Health

Epidemiology Resource Center

Quick Facts

About...Tetanus

What is tetanus?

Tetanus, also called lockjaw, is caused by bacteria. It affects the nervous system. The bacteria produce a toxin (poison) that causes muscles to tighten or “lock”. Tetanus is very rare in the United States. It is still common in some parts of the world. Tetanus is a serious disease and may cause death. No cases of tetanus have been reported in Indiana since 2009.

How is tetanus spread?

Tetanus bacteria are found in soil. Tetanus bacteria can enter the body through a wound contaminated with soil or feces (poop) of animals or humans. The bacteria may also enter the body through cuts, scrapes, and burns and by tainted street drugs that are injected. Rarely, tetanus may occur after surgery performed in unclean conditions. Tetanus is not spread from person to person.

Who is at risk for tetanus?

People who are not up-to-date on tetanus vaccination can be at risk for tetanus, especially if they have an injury and are not checked out by a doctor.

How do I know if I have tetanus?

See your doctor if you suffer a wound (especially a puncture wound) that appears dirty or that is red, swollen, hot to the touch, and painful. Your doctor may give you a dose of tetanus vaccine.

What are the symptoms of tetanus?

A common first sign of tetanus is stiffness in the jaw. It can be followed by stiffness of the neck, difficulty swallowing, muscle spasms, sweating, and fever. Complications from tetanus may include: spasms of the muscles that control breathing, broken bones (spine or long bones), high blood pressure, abnormal heartbeat, clots in the blood vessels of the lung, coma, and death.

How is tetanus treated?

Wounds should be cleaned as soon as possible after an injury. If you have not had a tetanus shot in the last 10 years, you should get a dose on the day of the injury. For severe wounds, a tetanus shot may be given if more than five years have passed since the last dose. Your doctor may also recommend tetanus immune globulin (TIG), antitoxin, or antibiotics.

How can tetanus be prevented?

Vaccines are available to prevent tetanus. Adults should receive a routine tetanus-diphtheria (Td) vaccine every ten years. Tdap vaccine, which also protects against pertussis (whooping cough), should be used to replace one routine Td dose for adults and teens. Children should receive doses of DTaP, Tdap, DT, or Td vaccines on the correct schedule. Your doctor can decide which vaccine is right for you.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to: <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/tetanus/in-short-both.htm>.

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