

Facts About Tetanus for Adults

What is tetanus?

Tetanus, commonly called lockjaw, is caused by a bacterial toxin, or poison, that affects the nervous system. It is contracted through a cut or wound that becomes contaminated with tetanus bacteria. The bacteria can get in through even a tiny pinprick or scratch, but deep puncture wounds or cuts like those made by nails or knives are especially susceptible to infection with tetanus. Tetanus bacteria are present worldwide and are commonly found in soil, dust and manure. Infection with tetanus causes severe muscle spasms, including “locking” of the jaw so the patient cannot open his/her mouth or swallow, and may lead to death by suffocation. Tetanus is not transmitted from person to person.

Prevention

Vaccination is the best way to protect against tetanus. Due to widespread immunization, tetanus is now a rare disease in the U.S. A combination vaccine, called Td, protects against both tetanus and diphtheria. A Td booster immunization is recommended every 10 years. Adults who have never received immunization against tetanus should start with a 3-dose primary series given over 7 to 12 months.

Symptoms

Common first signs of tetanus include muscular stiffness in the jaw (lockjaw) followed by stiffness of the neck, difficulty in swallowing, rigidity of abdominal muscles, generalized spasms, sweating and fever.

Symptoms usually begin 7 days after infection, but may appear from 3 days to 3 weeks after infection.

Who should get Td vaccine?

- ◆ All adults who have not had a Td booster immunization in the last 10 years. Older adults and diabetics should have careful review of their history of tetanus immunization.
- ◆ Adults who have never received immunization against tetanus.
- ◆ **All adolescents and adults who deferred their regular booster during 2001-2002 because of shortages of the vaccine – the supply problems have been resolved. For adolescents aged 11-18 years who have not already received Tdap (Td in combination with acellular pertussis antigens), a single dose of Tdap is recommended for the regular booster (rather than Td) to add protection against pertussis (whooping cough) .**
- ◆ Adults who have recovered from tetanus (lockjaw) disease.

Vaccine Safety

Tetanus vaccine and the combination Td vaccine are very safe and effective. Most people have no problems with either. When side effects do occur, they usually include soreness and redness or swelling at the injection site. As with any medicine, there are very small risks that serious problems could occur after getting the vaccine. However, the potential risks associated with tetanus disease are much greater than the potential risks associated with the tetanus vaccine. You cannot get tetanus from the vaccine.

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- FACT:** Tetanus can be prevented with a safe and effective vaccine.
- FACT:** You cannot get tetanus from the vaccine.
- FACT:** Tetanus is caused by a toxin produced by a type of bacteria found worldwide in soil, dust and manure.
- FACT:** Tetanus is not transmitted from one person to another; vaccination provides protection of the vaccinated individual only.
- FACT:** Almost all reported cases of tetanus occur in persons who either have never received the primary series of tetanus-preventing immunizations, or those who completed a primary series but have not had a booster vaccination in the past 10 years.
- FACT:** Approximately 16% of reported cases of tetanus are fatal.
- FACT:** In the U.S., where 50 or fewer cases of tetanus occur each year, deaths are more likely to occur in persons 60 years of age and older and in persons who are diabetic.
- FACT:** People with tetanus may have to spend several weeks in the hospital under intensive care and frequently require ventilator support.
- FACT:** For adults, a tetanus-diphtheria (Td) shot every 10 years ensures protection against both tetanus and diphtheria.
- FACT:** Recovery from tetanus illness may not result in immunity. People recovering from tetanus should be immunized soon after their condition has stabilized.