
Tetanus

Description: Tetanus, also called lockjaw, is caused by infection with the bacteria *Clostridium tetani*. These bacteria are common in the soil but are quickly killed by oxygen. Any wound or cut contaminated with the soil and not open to the air (such as a puncture wound or even a rose prick) will provide a suitable environment for the bacteria.

Tetanus is very rare in the United States due to the very high immunization rates of persons living here. Tetanus is difficult to treat, but is completely preventable through vaccination.

Symptoms: A common first sign is muscular stiffness in the jaw (lockjaw), followed by stiffness of the neck, difficulty in swallowing, rigidity of abdominal muscles, spasms, sweating and fever.

How it is Spread: It is not spread from person to person. Tetanus is usually acquired when a person who has not been immunized acquires such a wound by stepping on a dirty nail or being cut by a dirty tool. The bacteria infect the wound and produce a toxin that spreads through the blood. This toxin can cause severe muscle spasms, paralysis and frequently death.

Incubation: 8 days but may range from 3 days to 3 weeks.

Responsibility of Parents and Caregivers: Children receive tetanus vaccine in combination with the pertussis and diphtheria vaccine. After childhood, adults need a booster injection every 10 years to make sure they are protected. See control measure below.

Control Measures:

- Anyone who has an open wound should determine the date of his or her last tetanus booster. A person who has not had a booster within the past 10 years should receive a booster dose of vaccine and/or other medications to prevent tetanus disease. For some wounds, a person may need a booster if more than five years have elapsed since the last dose. Because tetanus is not spread person to person, tetanus in one child care attendee or staff will not spread to others.

Treatment: Once a person develops symptoms, there is no treatment for tetanus. The best treatment is prevention with immunization.

Comments: The single most important preventive measure is immunization.