



Durham Region Health Department Facts about...



Tetanus

What is it?

Tetanus, commonly known as lockjaw (tightening of the jaw muscles), is a serious disease of the nervous system. It is caused by bacteria that can be found in soil, dust, and manure. When the bacteria enter the body through broken skin, a toxin (poison) is made that affects the nerves that control muscle activity.

There has been a remarkable decline in the disease due to routine immunization with tetanus toxoid vaccine.

How is it spread?

Tetanus does **not spread from person to person**. Tetanus usually enters the body through broken skin after an injury such as a puncture, cut or bite that is contaminated with soil, feces or saliva.

What do I look for?

Symptoms usually occur between three days to three weeks after contact with the tetanus bacteria. One of the first signs of tetanus is painful muscle spasms of the jaw and neck making it hard to open the mouth. Other symptoms include stiffness of the stomach and back muscles and spasms of the facial muscles. Spasms last for three to four weeks, but complete recovery takes much longer. A low-grade fever and severe sweating may also occur.

How is it treated?

- Patients with tetanus are admitted to the hospital. Treatment depends on the type of wound and whether the person has had a tetanus vaccine in the past. Treatment may include Tetanus Immune Globulin (TIG), antibiotics, muscle relaxants, and supportive treatment such as breathing assistance and wound care.
- Patients with no history of tetanus vaccine should start the course of vaccination to prevent tetanus in the future.

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How can I protect myself?

- Tetanus is best prevented by vaccination.
- See Facts About... Diphtheria, Pertussis, Tetanus, Polio & Haemophilus Influenza B Vaccines.
- Always use a new, unused needle for injection medications or drugs.
- Immediately treat wounds and keep all wounds clean.
- Consult your health care provider if you have any concerns about your wound.
- Keep up to date with vaccinations and speak to your health care provider about your need for other vaccines.
- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water or use hand sanitizer when hands are not visibly dirty.

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905-668-2020 or 1-800-841-2729 | durham.ca/health

If you require this information in an accessible format, contact 1-800-841-2729.

