

Tetanus

Description

Bacteria (*Clostridium tetani*) are present almost everywhere, especially in soil, manure, or dust. Bacteria may enter through any break in the skin, including cuts, puncture wounds or burns. The wound can be tiny, such as with a splinter. Toxins produced by the bacteria travel to nerves that control muscle contraction, producing muscle spasms and seizures. Tetanus cannot be spread from person to person. It is now rare, due to tetanus immunization.

Signs and symptoms include:

- Stiffness of the jaw. Muscle pain and frequent, severe spasms.
 - Headache. Sore throat and difficulty in swallowing.
 - Difficulty using chest muscles to breathe.
 - Fast pulse. Profuse sweating.
- Stiff neck, arms, and legs.

Risk increases with

- Lack of up-to-date tetanus immunization.
 - Use of street drugs with unclean needles and syringes.
 - Burns, surgical wounds, and skin ulcers.
- Outdoor work or outdoor sports activity.

Preventive measures

- Obtain tetanus vaccination. It is given in a series of shots often in childhood. A booster shot every 10 years is recommended.
- Persons with severe and/or penetrating wounds need a booster if it has been 5 or more years since the last tetanus shot.

Who should not get a tetanus shot?

- Persons who have had a serious allergic reaction or other problems with the tetanus shot.
- If you currently have a moderate or severe illness.
- If you are pregnant.

Talk to your health care provider about the risks of the tetanus vaccine.