

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. 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 only way to protect against tetanus. Due to widespread immunization, tetanus is now a rare disease in the U.S. A booster immunization against tetanus is recommended every 10 years. A new combination vaccine, called Tdap, protects against tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis, and should be used for persons 11-64 years instead of Td (tetanus-diphtheria vaccine). Td should be used for adults 65 years and older. Adolescents and 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 bacteria enter the body through a wound, but this incubation period may range from 3 days to 3 weeks.

Who should get Tdap or Td vaccine?

- ◆ All adults aged 19-64 years who have not already received Tdap and have not had a Td booster immunization in the last 10 years should receive a single dose of Tdap (rather than Td). Adults ≥ 65 years who have not had a Td booster in the last 10 years should receive Td.
- ◆ Older adults and diabetics, who are at higher risk for tetanus, should carefully review of their history of tetanus immunization and receive Td or Tdap if they have not had a Td in the last 10 years.
- ◆ Adults who have never received immunization against tetanus should receive a three dose primary series.
- ◆ Adults who are health-care workers or who are in contact with infants <1 year of age should also receive Tdap vaccine if they have not had a Td in the past 2 years, in order to protect against pertussis (whooping cough).
- ◆ All adolescents and adults who deferred their regular booster during 2001-2002 because of shortages of the vaccine – the supply problems have been resolved.
- ◆ Adolescents aged 11-18 years who have not already received Tdap or Td should receive a single dose of Tdap (rather than Td) to add protection against pertussis (whooping cough).
- ◆ Any adult or adolescent who has recovered from tetanus (lockjaw) disease should receive Tdap or Td.

Vaccine Safety

Tetanus vaccine and the combination Td and Tdap vaccines 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 safe and effective vaccines.
- 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 10-20% 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 booster every 10 years ensures protection against tetanus. Tdap booster provides protection against tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis, and Td provides protection against tetanus and diphtheria.
- FACT:** Recovery from tetanus may not result in immunity. Patients recovering from tetanus should be immunized soon after their condition has stabilized.