

Tetanus

also known as lockjaw

Tetanus Symptoms

Tetanus is a bacterial disease. When the tetanus bacteria invade the body through a wound, they produce a toxin, or poison, that causes muscles to become tight, which is very painful. Tetanus mainly affects the neck and abdomen. Tetanus is also known as “lockjaw” because it often causes a person’s neck and jaw muscles to lock, making it hard to open the mouth or swallow. It also can cause breathing problems, severe muscle spasms, and seizure-like movements. Complete recovery can take months. If left untreated, tetanus can be fatal.

Causes of Tetanus

Unvaccinated children can get tetanus just by playing outdoors and getting cuts that become infected with the bacteria. That’s because tetanus bacteria are common in soil. Tetanus is not like any other vaccine-preventable disease. The main difference is that tetanus enters the body through wounds. It cannot be passed from person to person.

“Parents may have heard this, and it is true: children can get tetanus from stepping on a rusty nail,” says Doug Campos-Outcalt of the American Academy of Family Physicians. “Of course, they also can get it from other wounds as well. Deeper and more severe wounds are more likely to become infected with tetanus.”

Tetanus: The United States Story

In the United States, widespread vaccination against tetanus has made the disease almost non-existent. Vaccination to prevent tetanus began in the late 1940s. From 1947 through 1949, before widespread use of the vaccine, an average of 580 cases of tetanus and an average of 472 deaths from tetanus were reported.

Today, tetanus is uncommon in the United States, with an average of 29 reported cases annually from 2000 through 2009. Nearly all cases of tetanus are among people who have never received a tetanus vaccine, or adults who don’t stay up to date on their 10-year booster shots. More than half of the reported cases from 2001 through 2009 were among persons younger than 50 years of age, but almost all of the fatal cases were in persons age 65 and older.

“People of all ages can get tetanus,” says Dr. Tejpratap Tiwari of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). “Beginning tetanus vaccination on schedule and getting timely boosters is the best way to make sure you keep yourself and your children safe.”

Tetanus: The Global Story

“Disease caused by a toxin from the bacteria is always possible for people who are not vaccinated, because the tetanus bacteria are present everywhere in our environment,” says Dr. Vance Dietz of CDC’s Global Immunization Division. “Because we have a very safe and effective tetanus vaccine, parents don’t need to worry about seeing their child suffer from this disease.”

Unfortunately, cases of tetanus are still common in other parts of the world and it kills thousands of babies each year. In places where birthing conditions are not sanitary, tetanus in newborns is a real threat. The World Health Organization estimates that 58,000 newborns died of tetanus in 2010.

“I have seen the tragedy tetanus causes in other countries. It is very hard to forget seeing the babies who die from this vaccine-preventable disease,” says Dr. Dietz.

Tetanus Vaccine for Baby

Babies get DTaP vaccine to protect them from tetanus and two other diseases caused by bacteria, diphtheria and whooping cough (pertussis). DTaP vaccines are recommended at ages 2 months, 4 months, and 6 months, and at 15 through 18 months old. A DTaP booster is recommended at age 4 through 6 years. To reduce the number of shots needed at a vaccine visit, other vaccines have been combined with DTaP. Your doctor can tell you more about combination vaccines.

Because immunity to tetanus decreases over time, a booster shot (Td) is recommended every 10 years to stay protected. Tetanus is also part of the tetanus-diphtheria-pertussis vaccine (Tdap) that everyone needs to receive one time. Tdap is recommended for all 11- or 12-year-olds. Anyone who does not get the Tdap vaccine at that age should get one dose as a replacement for their 10-year tetanus-diphtheria (Td) booster shot.

Benefits of DTaP Vaccine

In addition to protecting from diphtheria and pertussis (also known as whooping cough), getting the vaccine to protect against tetanus is recommended—

- Saves lives.
- Prevents hospitalizations.

Getting DTaP as recommended also—

- Protects young children, for whom the diseases prevented by this vaccine can be especially serious.
- Protects the community by reducing the number of people who may spread diphtheria or pertussis.

Risks of DTaP Vaccine

- Mild side effects are fever, redness, swelling or soreness at the site of the injection, fussiness, tiredness or poor appetite, or vomiting.
- Moderate side effects are uncommon. One out of 1,000 children may cry for 3 or more hours; 1 out of 14,000 children may have a seizure; 1 out of 16,000 children may have high fever.
- Severe side effects are rare. For example, fewer than one in a million children have a severe allergic reaction.

Selected References

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the American Academy of Family Physicians, and the American Academy of Pediatrics strongly recommend vaccines.

800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636)
<http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines>