

TETANUS

(Lockjaw)



BASIC INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION

An infection in a wound that causes severe muscle spasms and can lead to death. Tetanus cannot be spread from person to person. It is now rare, due to tetanus immunization.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- 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.

CAUSES

Bacteria (*Clostridium tetani*) that are present almost everywhere, especially in soil, manure, or dust. Bacteria may enter through any break in the skin, including burns or puncture wounds. 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.

RISK INCREASES WITH

- Lack of up-to-date tetanus immunization.
- Newborn infants born to non-immunized mothers.
- 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 in combination with a diphtheria and pertussis vaccine in children. Booster shots are recommended every 10 years thereafter.
- An additional booster shot may be needed at the time of an injury.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

With early diagnosis and treatment, full recovery is likely in mild or moderate tetanus. Allow 4 weeks for recovery. The death rate from severe tetanus is about 50%.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Pneumonia.
- High blood pressure.
- Severe pain with muscle spasms.
- Irregular heartbeat.
- Bone fractures.
- Coma.
- Infection.
- Brain damage.
- Respiratory paralysis and death.



DIAGNOSIS & TREATMENT

GENERAL MEASURES

- Your health care provider will do a physical exam and ask questions about your symptoms and activities. Medical tests may include blood and culture studies.
- Hospital care is required. A quiet, dark room may be recommended. Treatment may include the use of breathing tubes, a respirator (machine to help breathing), intravenous (IV) fluid support, and drugs.
- Surgery to remove infected tissue may be needed.

MEDICATIONS

You may be given:

- Antitoxins to neutralize the nerve toxin.
- Muscle relaxants to control spasms.
- Sedatives to relieve anxiety.
- Anticonvulsants.
- Antibiotics.
- Tetanus combination vaccine.

ACTIVITY

During hospital time, bed rest is needed with as little disturbance as possible. During recovery, activities should be resumed gradually.

DIET

Intravenous (IV) fluids will be needed because of difficulty in swallowing.



NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

- You or a family member has symptoms of tetanus or observes them in someone else. Call immediately. This is an emergency!
- You or someone in your family needs basic or booster tetanus immunizations.
- You have a puncture wound or injury that breaks the skin, and you have not had an immunization or booster in 5 years.

Special notes:

More notes on the back of this page