

TETANUS

What is tetanus?

Tetanus, also sometimes called “lockjaw”, is caused by a toxin produced by a bacteria called *Clostridium tetani*. *C. tetani* is found all over, including soil, human waste, manure and anything lying on the ground.

How do you get tetanus?

You get tetanus by having a cut or wound that becomes infected with *C. tetani*. *C. tetani* grows in wounds, especially closed wounds like punctures, and produces a toxin that paralyzes muscles. In the worst case, tetanus can be fatal by paralyzing breathing muscles.

What are the symptoms of tetanus?

The most common symptom is stiffness of the jaw, commonly known as lockjaw. This makes it difficult to open the mouth. Other symptoms include stiffness of the stomach and back muscles and contraction of facial muscles. Sometimes irritability, restlessness, sweating and fever can also occur. Eventually painful muscle spasms develop that can be life threatening.

When do symptoms start?

Symptoms usually start 8-10 days after the wound is contaminated by the bacteria, but the onset of symptoms can range from 3 to 50 days.

How do you prevent tetanus?

Tetanus can be prevented with a vaccine. Children less than 7 years of age receive the DPT vaccine – a combined vaccine against diphtheria, pertussis (whooping cough), and tetanus – at 2,4,6 and 15-18 months of age and at 4-6 years of age. After this “primary series”, teenagers and adults need to have a booster vaccine every ten years for life.

Do adults really need to get a tetanus shot?

YES!! Adults who do not keep up with their booster shots for tetanus are putting themselves at risk for infection. Adults 50 years or older account for 70 percent of tetanus infections. Many older adults never received their primary series of vaccinations when they were children. Therefore it makes it very important that adults talk to their physicians about the status of their vaccinations. If you cannot remember the last time you had a tetanus shot then it is probably time to get one!

If I am injured, how do I know if I need a tetanus shot?

Any wound can become infected with tetanus, especially puncture wounds (hence the association with stepping on a rusty nail). If you are injured within 5 years of your last tetanus booster, you do not need another shot. If it has been between 5 and 10 years since your last booster, you will need another dose of the vaccine. If you have not had a tetanus shot in more than 10 years you will need both the vaccine and an “antitoxin” or *tetanus immune globulin* to quickly boost your body’s immunity against the tetanus toxin.

Where can I get a tetanus shot?

Most doctors’ offices can provide tetanus vaccinations. Your local health department is also a good place to go. You may also receive the vaccination at a hospital emergency room.

For more information about tetanus or advice regarding your vaccination status, call your physician or the Benton Franklin Health District at one of the numbers listed below.

Richland	943-2614
Kennewick	586-0207
Pasco	547-9737
Prosser	786-1633