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What is tetanus?

Tetanus, commonly called lockjaw, is an infection caused by bacteria named *Clostridium tetani* (*C. tetani*), that are found in the environment. Tetanus is an uncommon but very serious disease that requires immediate treatment in a hospital. Tetanus is rare in the United States due to widespread vaccination.

Who gets tetanus?

Anyone can get tetanus. However, several factors can increase risk for tetanus infection. People who have never received a tetanus vaccine are at increased risk. Similarly, people who are not up to date with their 10-year tetanus booster shots are also at increased risk.

Tetanus occurs worldwide but is more common in agricultural regions of warmer climates, especially where contact with animal manure is more likely.

How is tetanus spread?

Tetanus bacteria can get into someone's body through broken skin, usually through injuries. It is not spread from person to person.

What are the symptoms of tetanus?

Early symptoms include spasms of the jaw muscles, or "lockjaw", fever, sweating, stiffness in the neck and abdomen, and difficulty swallowing. Later symptoms include severe muscle spasms often lasting for several weeks.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Symptoms typically occur between 3 and 21 days (average 8 days) after someone is exposed. When symptoms appear sooner, they often are associated with more heavily contaminated wounds and more severe illness.

How is tetanus diagnosed?

Tetanus is diagnosed by a healthcare provider from clinical symptoms.

What is the treatment for tetanus?

Wounds should be thoroughly cleaned. Tetanus Immune Globulin (TIG) is recommended followed by vaccination with tetanus toxoid. Supportive care and airway maintenance are critical.

Do people who have been in contact with someone with tetanus need to be tested and treated?

No, tetanus cannot be spread from person to person.

How can tetanus be prevented?

An effective vaccine called tetanus toxoid (contained in Tdap, DT, DTaP, and Td vaccines) is recommended for all ages. Maintaining up-to-date tetanus vaccination is the single most important measure to prevent tetanus. A tetanus booster shot is recommended every 10 years throughout life.

How can I learn more about tetanus?

- If you have concerns about tetanus, contact a healthcare provider.
- Contact your local health department. You can find your local health department at vdh.virginia.gov/health-department-locator/.
- Visit the CDC page on tetanus at cdc.gov/tetanus/about/index.html for more information.

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External link will open in new window. Click link to exit Virginia Department of Health Website.