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What is tetanus?

Tetanus is a disease caused by *Clostridium tetani* bacteria that affects the nervous system. Commonly called lockjaw, tetanus is now rare in the United States due to widespread vaccination.

Who gets tetanus?

Tetanus occurs more often in persons who have never been vaccinated against tetanus or who have not had a booster dose in the past 10 years. Tetanus occurs worldwide but is more common in agricultural regions of warmer climates, especially where contact with animal manure is more likely. Neonatal tetanus frequently occurs in developing countries when access to vaccine and maternity care is limited.

How is tetanus spread?

The bacteria that cause tetanus enter the body through a break in the skin, primarily a wound. It is not spread from person to person.

What are the symptoms of tetanus?

Early symptoms include muscular stiffness in the jaw (lockjaw), stiffness in the neck and abdomen, and difficulty in swallowing. Later symptoms include severe muscle spasms often lasting for several weeks.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually begin within three days to three weeks after exposure with an average of eight days after exposure. When symptoms show up 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.

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 your healthcare provider.
- Call your local health department. A directory of local health departments is located at the [VDH Local Health Districts page](#).
- Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at [the CDC page on tetanus](#).

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