

Published on *VeteransNavigator* (<https://veteransnavigator.org>)

Tetanus Information for Adults

About Tetanus

Tetanus is different from other vaccine-preventable diseases because it does not spread from person to person. The bacteria are usually found in soil, dust, and manure and enter the body through breaks in the skin — usually cuts or puncture wounds caused by contaminated objects.

Today, tetanus is uncommon in the United States, with an average of about 30 reported cases each year. Nearly all cases of tetanus are among people who did not get all the recommended tetanus vaccinations. This includes people who have never received a tetanus vaccine and adults who don't stay up to date on their 10-year booster shots.

Signs and Symptoma

Symptoms typically occur **between 3 and 21 days** (average 8 days) after someone is exposed to *C. tetani*.

The **first sign** is most commonly spasms of the jaw muscles, or "lockjaw."

Other symptoms can include:

- Trouble swallowing
- Sudden, involuntary muscle spasms — often in the stomach
- Painful muscle stiffness all over the body
- Seizures (jerking or staring)
- Headache
- Fever and sweating
- Changes in blood pressure and heart rate

Contact your healthcare provider

Tetanus requires immediate treatment. Contact your healthcare provider if you have tetanus symptoms.

Complications

Tetanus can cause serious health problems, including:

- Laryngospasm (uncontrolled tightening of the vocal cords)
- Fracture (broken bone)
- Pulmonary embolism (blockage in lungs caused by a blood clot)
- Aspiration pneumonia (lung infection from inhaling spit or vomit)
- Breathing difficulty

Tetanus can lead to death (1 in 10 cases in the United States are fatal).

Risk factors

Anyone can get tetanus. However, several factors can increase risk for tetanus infection.

Vaccination status

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.

Recent wound

People with a recent wound are at increased risk for tetanus. This is especially true if the wound is deep or contaminated with dirt.

Other risk factors

The following risk factors also increase risk of tetanus:

- Being 70 years or older
- Having diabetes
- Having an immunocompromising condition
- Using injection drugs

Causes


Tetanus bacteria can get into someone's body through broken skin, usually through injuries.

> KEEP READING: [Tetanus: Causes and How It Spreads](#)


Prevention

Image

People of all ages need **TETANUS VACCINES**



DTaP for young children	Tdap for preteens	Td or Tdap for adults
✓ 2, 4, and 6 months ✓ 15 through 18 months ✓ 4 through 6 years	✓ 11 through 12 years	✓ Every 10 years

www.cdc.gov/tetanus 

Vaccination is the best way to protect against tetanus

CDC recommends tetanus vaccines for everyone. The best way to prevent tetanus is to get vaccinated. CDC recommends tetanus vaccination for everyone.

> KEEP READING: [Vaccination](#)

Care for wounds to prevent infection

Immediate and good wound care can also help prevent infection.

- Apply first aid to even minor, non-infected wounds
- Wash hands with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand rub
- Consult a healthcare provider if you have concerns and need advice

Medicine may be needed in some cases

Medicine called **human tetanus immune globulin (TIG)** can help prevent tetanus. Healthcare providers can use it when someone isn't up to date with tetanus vaccination and has serious or contaminated wounds.

Testing and diagnosis

Healthcare providers usually decide if someone has tetanus by looking for common signs and symptoms. They may also ask about a recent history of cuts, scrapes, punctures, and trauma.

No lab tests can confirm tetanus.

Treatment and recovery

Tetanus is a medical emergency requiring:

- Evaluation and care in the hospital
- Immediate treatment with TIG
- Aggressive wound care
- Drugs to control muscle spasms
- Antibiotics
- Tetanus vaccination

Depending on how serious the infection is, someone with tetanus may need a machine to help them breathe.

Article Source

Centers for Disease Control (CDC)

Source URL

<https://www.cdc.gov>

Last Reviewed

Thursday, July 4, 2024