



TETANUS

What is tetanus?

Tetanus is a serious disease caused by a toxin (poison) made by bacteria. It causes painful muscle stiffness and can be deadly. The DTaP and Tdap vaccines prevent tetanus.

What are the symptoms of tetanus?

Tetanus in children starts with headache, jaw cramping, and muscle spasms (sudden, involuntary muscle tightening).

It also causes the following:

- Painful muscle stiffness all over the body
- Trouble swallowing
- Seizures (jerking or staring)
- Fever and sweating
- High blood pressure and fast heart rate

Tetanus is often called “lockjaw” because the jaw muscles tighten, and the person cannot open his mouth.

How serious is tetanus?

Tetanus is very dangerous. It can cause breathing problems and paralysis (unable to move parts of the body). Muscle spasms can be strong enough to break a child’s spine or other bones.

It can take months to recover fully from tetanus. A child might need weeks of hospital care. As many as one out of five people who get tetanus dies.

How does a person get tetanus?

The bacteria that cause tetanus are found in soil. They get into the body through a puncture of the skin. A person also can be infected after a burn or an animal bite.

Tetanus does not spread from one person to another.

Can tetanus be prevented?

The best prevention against tetanus is immunization. There are four combination vaccines used to prevent diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis: DTaP, Tdap, DT, and Td. Two of these (DTaP and DT) are given to children younger than 7 years of age, and two (Tdap and Td) are given to older children and adults.

Td is a tetanus-diphtheria vaccine given to adolescents and adults as a booster shot every 10 years, or after an exposure to tetanus under some circumstances. Tdap is similar to Td but also contains protection against pertussis. Adolescents 11-18 years of age (preferably at age 11-12 years) and adults 19 through 64 years of age should receive a single dose of Tdap. For adults 65 and older who have close contact with an infant and have not previously received Tdap, one dose should be received. Tdap also should be given to 7-to10-year-olds who are not fully immunized against pertussis. Tdap can be given no matter when Td was last received.

(Upper-case letters in these abbreviations denote full-strength doses of diphtheria (D) and tetanus (T) toxoids and pertussis (P) vaccine. Lower-case “d” and “p” denote reduced doses of diphtheria and pertussis used in the adolescent/adult-formulations. The “a” in DTaP and Tdap stands for “acellular,” meaning that the pertussis component contains only a part of the pertussis organism.)