

IDRS Infectious Disease Reporting System

Disease Reporting 24 Hours a Day

Columbus Public Health and Franklin County Public Health

TETANUS

Tetanus is a very serious disease caused by a toxin (poison) produced by a bacteria (*Clostridium tetani*). It is commonly called lockjaw. As a result of widespread immunization, tetanus is now a rare disease.

Symptoms

Symptoms of tetanus usually occur within 3-21 days (8 days on average) and may include:

- Muscle stiffness in the jaw (lockjaw) is often the first sign.
- Painful muscle spasms and rigidity spreading to the neck and then the rest of the body
- Sweating and fever

Transmission

- The tetanus germ is present throughout the environment and is commonly found in soil and animal manure. Infection occurs when a puncture wound or cut is contaminated with the bacteria.
- Tetanus is not transmitted from person to person.
- Injection drug users may also get tetanus through injection wounds.
- Almost all reported cases of tetanus are in persons who have either never been vaccinated, or who completed a series of vaccines in childhood, but have not had a booster shot in the preceding 10 years.

Treatment

- When someone has a wound that could be contaminated, it should be thoroughly cleaned and treated. If they have not been vaccinated, they can be treated with Tetanus Immune Globulin (TIG-Human) to help prevent tetanus from developing. Antibiotics can kill the bacteria that cause tetanus, but they do not affect the toxin produced by the bacteria that makes people sick.
- People can get tetanus again. Even people who have had tetanus should be immunized.
- Once a person develops symptoms, there is no treatment for tetanus.
- Complications include spasm of the throat and breathing muscles, causing breathing problems. Other complications include bone fractures from severe spasm, high blood pressure, abnormal heartbeats, unconsciousness, pneumonia and death.

Prevention

- The single most important preventive measure is immunization. Everyone should receive a primary series of the vaccines DTaP, DT or Td with boosters of Td every 10 years. The "T" part of the vaccine name indicates the portion to immunize against Tetanus.
- Clean minor wounds with soap and warm water. Leave wounds possibly contaminated with tetanus uncovered, if possible. For severe wounds, see a health care provider for evaluation and treatment.
- Pay attention to any signs of infection such as redness or warmth near the wound, swelling, tenderness, or fever. If signs develop, consult a health care provider.

Additional Information

- You can get a tetanus shot from most health care providers, your local health department, and in hospital emergency rooms.

All information is general in nature and is not intended to be used as a substitute for appropriate professional advice.



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