Tetanus (Lockjaw)

Frequently Asked Questions

What is tetanus?
Tetanus is a disease caused by a toxin-producing bacterium. The bacteria are most dangerous when they release toxin (poison) inside the human body. The bacteria spores are common in the environment.

Who gets tetanus?
Tetanus can occur in people of all ages. Before the availability of a vaccine, tetanus was a common childhood illness. There are still cases of tetanus around the world where populations are not vaccinated against the disease. Nearly all U.S. tetanus cases today are among adults who didn't receive or didn't stay up to date with their tetanus booster shot

How do people get tetanus?
Tetanus (lockjaw) differs from other vaccine-preventable diseases in that it is not contagious. Tetanus cannot be spread from person to person. The tetanus bacteria enter the body through a wound, cut or scratch. The symptoms may be limited to the area around the wound or spread to affect the entire body. A rare form of newborn tetanus happens when a newborn does not have immunity from his/her mother and becomes infected because the umbilical cord was cut with unclean scissors or knives. Children can also get tetanus following severe burns, ear infections, tooth infections, or animal bites.

What are the symptoms of tetanus?
When tetanus gets into the body, it can take up to three weeks for the first symptoms to appear. The bacteria produce a toxin which spreads throughout the body, causing painful muscle spasms in the neck, arms, legs, and stomach. These muscle spasms can be strong enough to break a child's bones. Tetanus toxin infection can also lead to "locking" of the jaw so a person cannot open his mouth, affecting his/her ability to breathe or swallow. Later symptoms include severe muscle spasms and seizure-like activity. Tetanus infection may result in severe damage to the nervous system. Children with tetanus might have to spend several weeks in the hospital under intensive care. The number of tetanus cases in the United States has fallen from about 500 a year in the 1940s to only about 50 cases a year today. One out of every 10 people who get tetanus die.

How is tetanus diagnosed?
A health care provider diagnoses tetanus by observing signs and symptoms and taking a medical history.

What is the treatment for tetanus?
The infected wound should be cleaned thoroughly. Tetanus immune globulin (TIG) is recommended for people with tetanus. The tetanus anti-toxin vaccine should be given to the person during recovery.

How can tetanus be prevented?

Tetanus is a vaccine preventable disease. Getting vaccinated against tetanus will protect people from getting this disease. Make sure that wounds, cuts or scratches are clean and covered to protect them while they are healing.

Who should get the tetanus vaccine?

The tetanus anti-toxin vaccine is combined with the pertussis and diphtheria anti-toxin vaccines. The type of combination vaccination that is given depends on the person's age. The DTaP/ DT vaccine is given to infants and children younger than seven years. The Tdap/Td vaccine is available for older children and adults. Adults should get a booster every 10 years.

Where can I get more information on tetanus?

- Your health care provider
- Your local health department localhealth.nj.gov
- NJ Department of Health nj.gov/health
- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd/tetanus/index.html

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional. Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.