

Infectious Disease Factsheet

Tetanus is a severe disease that can result in serious illness and death. Tetanus vaccination protects against the disease.

Tetanus

Last updated: 04 February 2008

What is tetanus?

Tetanus (sometimes called lock-jaw) is a disease caused by the bacteria *Clostridium tetani*. Toxin made by the bacteria attacks a person's nervous system. Although the disease is fairly uncommon now, it can be fatal.

What are the symptoms?

Early symptoms of tetanus include:

- Painful muscle spasms that begin in the jaw (lock jaw)
- Stiff neck, shoulder and back muscles
- Difficulty swallowing
- Violent generalized muscle spasms
- Convulsions
- Breathing difficulties

A person may have a fever and sometimes develop abnormal heart rhythms. Complications include pneumonia, broken bones (from the muscle spasms), respiratory failure and cardiac arrest.

How is it spread?

- The disease usually occurs after an incubation period of 3 to 21 days (range one day to several months).
- *Clostridium tetani* bacteria are found in dust and animal faeces. Infection may occur after minor injury (sometimes unnoticed punctures to the skin that are contaminated with soil, dust or manure) or after major injuries such as open fractures, dirty or deep penetrating wounds, and burns. Tetanus is not passed on from one person to another.
- Neonatal tetanus (affecting new born babies) can occur in babies born to inadequately immunised mothers, especially after unsterile treatment of the umbilical cord stump.

Who is at risk?

- In Australia, tetanus mostly occurs in older adults who were not adequately immunised.
- In poor countries, with lower immunisation rates, newborn children, and young adults are also at risk.
- Injecting drug users may have a greater risk of being infected with the bacteria from contaminated injection sites.

How is it prevented?

- Immunisation protects against tetanus. Tetanus vaccine is given at 2, 4 and 6 months of age, with boosting doses at 4 years, between 15 to 17 years, and at 50 years of age.
- Individuals who received a primary course of 3 doses as adults, should receive booster doses 10 and 20 years after the primary course.
- Adults who have sustained tetanus prone wounds (e.g. open fractures, deep penetrating wounds, contaminated wounds or burns) should disinfect the wound and seek medical attention and receive a boosting dose of tetanus vaccine if more than 5 years have elapsed

since their last dose. See [Immunisation Handbook](#)

- If there is doubt about prior vaccination history, tetanus toxoid should be given.

How is it diagnosed?

A doctor can diagnose tetanus from the symptoms, and an examination.

How is it treated?

Treatment may include antitoxin, antibiotics, surgical treatment of the infected area and prolonged treatment in the intensive care unit of a hospital.

What is the public health response?

Hospital staff must confidentially notify cases of tetanus to the local public health unit. Public health unit staff will talk to the treating doctor and patient or their carer to identify risk factors that the patient may have, and to enquire about vaccination history. Information on the number of people who get tetanus and their risk factors helps find better ways to prevent the illness.

Updates and other links

- Vaccine information for women who are breast feeding /resources/publichealth/infectious/diseases/pertussis/pregnant_women_info_dtpa.pd

Further information - Public Health Units in NSW

For more information please contact your doctor, local public health unit or community health centre - look under NSW Government at the front of the White Pages

Metropolitan Areas	Location	Number	Rural Areas	Location	Number
Northern Sydney/Central Coast	Hornsby	02 9477 9400	Greater Southern	Goulburn	02 4824 1837
	Gosford	02 4349 4845		Albury	02 6080 8900
South Eastern Sydney/Illawarra	Randwick	02 9382 8333	Greater Western	Broken Hill	08 8080 1499
	Wollongong	02 4221 6700		Dubbo	02 6841 5569
Sydney South West	Camperdown	02 9515 9420		Bathurst	02 6339 5601
Sydney West	Penrith	02 4734 2022	Hunter/New England	Newcastle	02 4924 6477
	Parramatta	02 9840 3603		Tamworth	02 6764 8000
Justice Health Service	Matraville	02 9311 2707	North Coast	Port Macquarie	02 6588 2750
				Lismore	02 6620 7500