

Montgomery County Health Department

Tetanus

(lockjaw)

Note: It is recommended persons bruised, scratched, or wounded after a flood seek medical evaluation from their private physician or closest Emergency Room.

What is tetanus?

Tetanus, commonly called lockjaw, is a bacterial disease that affects the nervous system.

Who gets tetanus?

Tetanus occurs more often in older people, agricultural workers, and occasionally flood victims who are injured (e.g., cuts, scratches, or wounds), sustain an infected wound and have inadequate tetanus immunization.

How is tetanus spread?

Tetanus is contracted through a wound which becomes contaminated with soil containing the tetanus organism. It is not transmitted from person to person.

Where is the tetanus germ found?

The tetanus germ is present throughout the environment and is commonly found in soil contaminated with manure.

What are the symptoms of tetanus?

A common first sign of tetanus is muscular stiffness in the jaw (lockjaw), followed by stiffness of the neck, difficulty in swallowing, rigidity of abdominal muscles, spasms, sweating and fever.

How soon after infection do symptoms occur?

The incubation period is usually eight days but may range from three days to three weeks. Shorter incubation periods are associated with more heavily contaminated wounds.

Does past infection with tetanus make a person immune?

Recovery from tetanus may not result in immunity. Second attacks can occur and immunization is indicated after recovery.

What is the treatment for tetanus?

Wounds should be thoroughly cleaned, and if needed dead or devitalized tissue removed. If the patient has not had a tetanus toxoid booster in the previous 10 years, a single booster injection should be administered on the day of injury. For severe wounds, a booster may be given if more than five years have elapsed since the last dose.

What are the complications associated with tetanus?

Complications generally include spasm of the vocal cords and/or spasms of the respiratory muscles causing interference with breathing.

Is there a vaccine for tetanus?

An effective vaccine called tetanus toxoid has been available for many years. Tetanus toxoid in combination with diphtheria toxoid and pertussis vaccine (DTP) is given to children. Persons who are seven years of age or older should receive Td (tetanus and diphtheria) toxoid. A tetanus booster shot is recommended every 10 years.

What can be done to prevent the spread of tetanus?

The single most important preventive measure is to maintain a high level of immunization in the community.

Where can I get more information about tetanus?

For general Tetanus information, pamphlets and other public education materials:

Montgomery County Health Department: www.montcopa.org/health (610) 278-5117

Pennsylvania Department of Health: www.dsf.health.state.pa.us/health [877]-PA-HEALTH (1-877-724-3258)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC]: www.cdc.gov/vaccines/pubs/pinkbook/downloads/tetanus.pdf