

Updated September 2011

Tetanus

What is it?

Tetanus is a disease caused by the bacteria, *Clostridium tetani*, which is often found in animal intestines. The toxin produced by tetanus bacteria can cause a fatal paralysis.

Where is it?

When tetanus bacteria are passed into soil in animal waste, they produce spores that stay in dust, manure and soil. When these spores get into a wound, they release tetanus toxin that causes muscle spasm, paralysis and can lead to death.

Tetanus is now less common in wealthy countries with good medical care as most people have been vaccinated. Most cases are in babies and very young children in developing countries.

How do I get it?

You can get tetanus if dirt or manure gets into a cut or wound - it does not need to be a deep or serious injury to put you at risk. Animal bites are also a rare tetanus hazard. It is one of the few vaccine preventable infectious diseases that is not spread directly between people.

What are the symptoms?

- Muscle spasm and stiffness.
- Difficulty opening the mouth (known as lockjaw).
- A fixed grinning expression.
- Difficulty breathing and swallowing.
- Spasm and stiffness, which slowly moves down the body, affecting the throat, neck, chest and back.
- High temperature.
- Raised blood pressure.
- Sweating.

Symptoms usually start about a week after you have been exposed, but can take up to three weeks to appear.

Tetanus can be fatal. Complications that can kill are:

- A blood clot in your lungs (called a pulmonary embolism).
- A heart attack.



- Blood poisoning.
- Kidney failure.
- Suffocation.

Anyone who has not had a full course of tetanus vaccine is most at risk.

What's my risk?

No country is free of tetanus, but it is easily prevented by vaccination. In countries like the UK nearly everyone has been vaccinated, so the number of tetanus cases is very low. In less wealthy regions, medical care can be difficult to access and the vaccine may not always be available, so there is more tetanus.

Can it be treated?

Yes, but tetanus can be fatal and is a very serious illness that needs intensive medical care. It is much safer to avoid infection.

Is there a vaccine?

Yes, in the UK babies and small children get tetanus vaccine as part of their routine childhood immunisations. Older children, teenagers and adults are given booster doses of tetanus vaccine as a three in one combined injection with [diphtheria](#) and [polio](#).

If you are going to remote areas where it is difficult to get medical care, and you have not had tetanus vaccine in the last 10 years, you must get a booster (even if you had 5 doses of vaccine in the past).

How can I prevent it?

- Clean cuts, scratches, grazes or wounds carefully
- Get urgent medical attention for any wounds with dirt or foreign objects in them.
- Make sure you and your family are all up to date with tetanus vaccination.

Links

[NHS Choices: Tetanus.](#)

[World Health Organization: Tetanus.](#)