

Tetanus (Lockjaw)

Tetanus is caused by the bacterium, *Clostridium tetani*, that produces a neurotoxin in a contaminated wound. The onset of the disease is gradual, occurring over 1 to 7 days, and symptoms progress to severe generalized muscle spasms which are often aggravated by any external stimulus. Severe spasms persist for one week or more and subside over several weeks in people who are able to recover. Localized Tetanus manifests as local muscle spasms in the area surrounding the infected wound. Tetanus in the head and neck causes dysfunction of the nerves in this area, and both conditions may proceed to generalized Tetanus which can lead to death.

The organism is a normal inhabitant of the soil and in animal and human intestines and is found worldwide. Tetanus occurs more commonly in warmer climates and during warmer months because of the higher frequency of contaminated wounds associated with these locations and seasons. Widespread active immunization against Tetanus has significantly decreased the incidence of disease in the United States where 40 or fewer cases have been reported annually since 1999.

If a person is infected, Tetanus Immune Globulin can be given as a single dose and infiltrated around the wound. This may help lessen the severity of the disease. Supportive care is instituted to control spasms.

Active immunization is recommended for all infants and children, and booster doses should be given in the teenage years, as well as in the adult years. Severe allergic reactions as well as neurologic side effects have been reported but are rare. Anyone with an allergic reaction to a prior Tetanus vaccine should not have further doses unless the patient can be desensitized.