



Department of Health and Environmental Control Fact Sheet

Tetanus

What is tetanus?

Tetanus is an infection caused by bacteria called *Clostridium tetani*. When the bacteria invade the body, they produce a toxin, or poison, that causes muscles to tighten and cramp painfully. Tetanus is also called “lockjaw” because it often causes a person’s neck and jaw muscles to lock, making it hard to open the mouth or swallow. It can also cause breathing problems. If left untreated, tetanus can be deadly. Tetanus infection is uncommon in the United States. Nearly all cases of tetanus are seen in people who have never had the tetanus vaccine or adults who aren’t up to date on their tetanus shots.

How can tetanus get into the body?

The bacteria can get into the body through broken skin, usually through injuries from contaminated objects. It is not spread from person to person. Certain breaks in the skin are more likely to get infected with tetanus bacteria. These include:

- Wounds contaminated with dirt, poop (feces), or spit (saliva)
- Wounds caused by an object puncturing the skin, like a nail or needle (puncture wounds)
- Burns
- Crush injuries
- Injuries with dead tissue

What is the immediate risk of tetanus in areas impacted by flooding?

Exposure to flood waters does not increase the risk of tetanus, however, the process of cleaning up and rebuilding from natural disasters like a flood can lead to injuries. For this reason, anyone who is working to clean up after this event should be sure that they are up to date with tetanus vaccination, ideally before starting cleanup activities.

How often is tetanus vaccine recommended?

Tetanus vaccines are recommended for infants, children, teens and adults to prevent tetanus. Adults who have had a full series of tetanus vaccine need a tetanus booster shot every 10 years. This tetanus booster may be a Td or Tdap vaccine. The Tdap vaccine is recommended instead of Td for one tetanus booster during adulthood. The Tdap vaccine protects against tetanus and pertussis.

What if I have an injury?

First aid, even for minor cuts and burns, is very important during flood cleanup. If possible, immediately clean all wounds and cuts with soap and clean water. If you receive a puncture wound or any wound that could be contaminated with dirt, poop (feces), spit (saliva)—or a burn, crush injury or injury with dead tissue, seek medical attention immediately from a doctor or other health care professional. A health care provider will determine if you need a tetanus vaccine booster or other preventive treatments. Your local DHEC health department can provide the tetanus vaccine only. If you need medical attention for a wound, you should seek care from a health care provider, urgent care or emergency department.

For more information: <http://www.cdc.gov/tetanus/index.html>