

TETANUS

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What is Tetanus?

Tetanus, also known as “lockjaw” is an acute disease caused by the bacteria/germ *Clostridium tetani*. This germ produces a harmful chemical toxin, that when allowed to enter the body affects several areas of muscle and can lead to death if not treated with vigorous medical care. The *Clostridium tetani* germ is commonly found in the soil, dust, and stool. Open wounds are an ideal place for the germ to grow and produce its harmful toxin.

What are the Symptoms of Tetanus?

- Tightening of the jaw muscle (“lockjaw”)
- Sudden, uncontrolled muscle tightening often in the stomach
- Painful muscle tightening all over the body
- Trouble eating and drinking
- Headache
- Fever and sweating
- Changes in blood pressure and a fast heart rate

Who is at Risk of Developing Tetanus?

Anyone who has not been vaccinated for tetanus is at risk of getting the disease. Infection begins with an open skin wound (cut, scratch, puncture, burn).

How does a Person Become Infected?

Clostridium tetani spores are readily found in our environment. When these spores enter an open skin wound they develop bacteria that can spread throughout the body and cause illness. People who work or engage in outdoor activities on a regular basis (for example: farmers, firefighters, constructors, campers and gardeners) are at a higher risk.

Is Tetanus Contagious?

No. Tetanus does not spread from one person to another. Tetanus gets into the body through an open wound on the skin such as cuts, burns, or animal bites.



How is Tetanus Treated?

Tetanus is a medical emergency requiring: care in the hospital, immediate treatment with medicine (including medicine to control muscle tightening), thorough wound care, antibiotics to kill the germ and a booster shot.

A rusty roofing nail can be a vehicle for tetanus bacteria and stepping on one can be deadly.
Adair Hoover, 2018, HGIC, Clemson Extension

How is Tetanus Prevented?

Vaccination with the “tetanus shot” is the only way to prevent infection with *Clostridium tetani*. The vaccination is not a once for lifetime shot, people need to get shots regularly as this is the best tool to prevent tetanus. You should consult with your health care professional to determine whether you are up-to-date on vaccination. Additionally, any time that you have any break in the skin, even minor wounds, immediately treat the site with good wound care.

What can be Done to Reduce their Risk of Getting Tetanus?

Vaccination and immediate good wound care can help you reduce the risk of getting Tetanus. Other suggestions include being careful when using sharp items, washing hands often with soap and water, wearing shoes all the times and keeping away from rusted nails.

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If this document didn't answer your questions, please contact HGIC at hgic@clemson.edu or 1-888-656-9988.

Author(s)

Adair Hoover, HGIC Food Safety Agent, Clemson Extension, Clemson University

Yueyuan Zhang, PHD Candidate, Department of Food, Nutrition, and Packaging Sciences, Clemson University

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864-986-4310 | 1-888-656-9988 (SC residents only) | HGIC@clemson.edu