

# TETANUS



**WHAT IS TETANUS?** Tetanus is a serious disease that is caused by bacteria. It is also known as “lockjaw.” Tetanus bacteria are everywhere in the environment, and can get into the body through a sore or wound.

When the bacteria that cause tetanus enter the body, they produce a powerful toxin (or poison) that attacks the nervous system; this can cause people’s jaw muscles to tighten, so that they can’t open their mouth or swallow.

As the toxin spreads, it causes the muscles in the neck, chest and stomach to tighten and cramp painfully. People who get tetanus may have to spend several weeks in the hospital while they are being treated.

If tetanus is not treated, it can be deadly. The best way to prevent tetanus is through vaccination.



**HOW IS TETANUS SPREAD?** Tetanus does not spread from person to person. The tetanus bacteria are usually found in dirt, dust and manure, and enter the body through breaks in the skin, such as cuts or puncture wounds caused by unclean objects.

Certain breaks in the skin are more likely to get infected with tetanus bacteria. These include:

- Wounds contaminated with dirt, feces (poop) or saliva
- Wounds that cause the skin to be punctured by an object (for example, a nail or a needle), or an animal bite
- Wounds caused when the body is crushed

## PREVENTION

You can protect against tetanus with a safe and effective vaccine. For the best protection, there are five recommended doses of the vaccine in childhood, another dose in the teen years and booster shots every 10 years for adults. The vaccine is given at:

- Two months, four months, six months and 18 months of age
- Four to six years of age
- 14 to 16 years of age
- Adults should receive a booster shot every 10 years

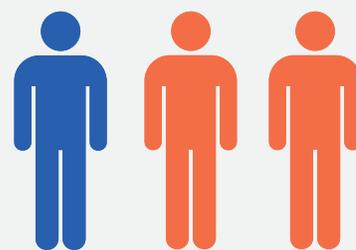
- Wounds with dead tissue (skin), such as burns, frostbite or gangrene
- Skin punctures from non-sterile needles (such as with injection drug use, or self-performed tattooing or body piercing)



**IS IT SERIOUS?** Tetanus is a medical emergency that requires immediate treatment in a hospital, sometimes in the intensive care unit. Complications of tetanus include:

- Broken bones from muscle spasms
- Blood clots that build up in the lungs
- Pneumonia (a lung infection)
- Difficulty breathing, which can lead to death
- Nerve or brain damage in infants or children

**TETANUS KILLS ALMOST  
1 IN 3 OF THE PEOPLE  
IT INFECTS**



## WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

Most people think that tetanus is caused by contact with rusty nails, but the bacteria that cause tetanus lives in dirt, dust and soil. Animal bites, minor scrapes, or puncture wounds during renovation work or gardening can also cause infection.

Tetanus occurs worldwide, and people of any age can get it. Infants and elderly people are most vulnerable.

Vaccination is the only way to prevent getting tetanus. Thanks to routine immunization, tetanus is very rare in Canada. Make sure you and your family are protected by being up to date with the tetanus vaccine.



## SYMPTOMS

The symptoms of tetanus can happen from three days to several weeks after the tetanus bacteria enters the body through a wound. The most common symptom is sudden cramping and tightening of muscles, beginning with the neck and face. The jaw often locks shut. This is why tetanus is sometimes called “lockjaw.”

Other symptoms include:

- Headache
- Painful muscle stiffness all over the body
- Trouble swallowing
- Jerking or staring (seizures)
- Fever and sweating
- High blood pressure and a fast heart rate

## STAY UP TO DATE WITH YOUR VACCINATIONS



The vaccine that protects us against tetanus is almost 100% effective, as long as a person has had the proper vaccine dosage within the past 10 years. That’s why it is important for everyone to keep their tetanus immunization up to date.

The vaccines are part of the publicly funded vaccine schedule and are offered free to all people in Ontario. The tetanus vaccine is required for children to attend school in Ontario and for children attending a daycare centre, unless they have a valid exemption.

**IT TAKES ALL OF US TO PROTECT EACH OF US.** Talk to your health care provider or your local public health unit about the tetanus vaccine. For information about Ontario’s immunization schedules, please visit [Ontario.ca/vaccines](https://ontario.ca/vaccines).