

# Disaster Relief

## *Preventing Tetanus*



The best offense is a good defense—especially against infection. The first thing to do in guarding against infection is to cleanse the wound thoroughly with soap and water. Your skin is the first line of defense against infection.

A serious infection can cause serious medical issues. One of these is known as tetanus. Tetanus is caused by a bacterium found in the soil and in the feces of common farm animals. It can infect many kinds of wounds through a break in the skin.

Tetanus gets into the body mainly through puncture wounds, lacerations, abrasions, burns, or breaks in the skin. The bacteria multiplies in an environment that is low in oxygen, so puncture wounds and other deep wounds are a perfect opportunity for bacteria to grow. The bacteria produces a powerful toxin, one of the most lethal toxins known to man, and this toxin affects the central nervous system and specific muscles.

**Symptoms:** fever, difficulty swallowing, irritability, headache, and muscle spasms near the infected area. When the infection progresses throughout the body, it can affect other muscles, such as the jaw, which is where the term “lockjaw” comes from. Once tetanus gets into the nervous system, the condition is irreversible.

**Prevention:** Immunization and tetanus boosters are the best ways to prevent this infection. Because the immunization does not last a lifetime, the booster shot is necessary to protect against this infection. Booster shots are recommended every 5 to 10 years, or whenever a wound has been contaminated. This includes after a car accident, if there is any type of puncture wound. The most common object that causes contamination is a rusty nail.

Again, the first line of defense is to thoroughly clean an open wound. To clean a minor wound, clean with soap and water, and apply an antibiotic ointment along with a clean or sterile dressing. Major wounds need to be cleaned and treated at a medical facility. If signs of infection develop, seek medical attention immediately.

Any infected wounds of the face, neck, or head should receive immediate attention by medical personnel; tetanus toxin can travel rapidly to the brain.

A healthcare provider can determine whether you need a tetanus shot. Contact your healthcare provider if you do not recall the date of your last tetanus immunization or booster shot.

### Signs of Infection

- The area around the wound becomes swollen and red.
- The area is warm to the touch and may throb in pain.
- Some wounds have a pus discharge or slight drainage (yellowish or whitish).
- A more serious infection may cause the person to feel ill and may cause a fever.
- Red streaks may develop that progress from the wound in the direction of the heart.

If a fever or red streaks develop, this is a sign the infection is becoming much worse. If this should occur, contact a healthcare provider immediately.

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