

# Tetanus

## Fact Sheet

### What is Tetanus?

Tetanus, better known as lockjaw, is an acute and often fatal disease caused by an extremely potent neurotoxin produced by the bacterium *Clostridium tetani*. This bacterium is found in the soil and in the intestines of animals and humans.

Wounds that are contaminated with soil or animal/human feces and that are associated with tissue injury and necrosis are most frequently associated with tetanus. Cases related to injection drug use, animal bites and lacerations have been reported, as well as rare cases occurring after bowel surgery or aspiration of soil and feces.

### What are the symptoms?

Early symptoms include muscle spasms in the jaw (lockjaw), neck and abdomen, and difficulty swallowing. This can lead to severe generalized muscle spasms, generalized tonic seizure-like activity and severe autonomic nervous system disorders. Complications can include bone fractures and abnormal heart rhythm. Death occurs in 10-20% of cases, mainly among older people.

### How is it transmitted?

The bacteria enter through a break in the skin. Tetanus is not transmitted from person to person.

### How can you prevent it?

The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices recommends 5 doses of diphtheria and tetanus toxoids during childhood and a booster dose every 10 years thereafter.

### Other Questions?

Talk to your health care provider or call our Communicable Disease Program at 613-966-5500 or 1-800-267-2803, ext. 349. | TTY Dial 711 (1-800-267-6511) | [hpePublicHealth.ca](http://hpePublicHealth.ca)

### Reference

Public Health Agency of Canada, (2006). *Canadian Immunization Guide*. (7th Ed.). Ottawa, ON: Public Works & Government Services.

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