

# Tetanus (Lockjaw)

## The Disease

Tetanus enters the body through cuts in the skin. It can get in through even a tiny pinprick or scratch, but it prefers deep puncture wounds or cuts, like those made by nails or knives. Children can also get tetanus following severe burns, ear infections, tooth infections, or animal bites. Rusty nails are often blamed for causing tetanus, but it is the tetanus bacteria, and not rust, that causes the disease. You can get tetanus from a shiny nail as easily as from a rusty one.

Tetanus bacteria can live anywhere, but they are usually found in soil, dust, and manure. Once they get into the body through a wound, it can take from 3 days to 3 weeks (usually about 8 days) for the first symptoms to appear. These are usually a headache, crankiness, and spasms of the jaw muscles.

Like diphtheria, tetanus can produce a toxin (poison) inside the body. As this toxin spreads, it causes muscle spasms in the neck, arms, legs, and stomach. It can cause painful muscle contractions strong enough to break a child's bones. Children with tetanus might have to spend several weeks in the hospital under intensive care. There are only about 50 cases of tetanus a year in the United States, but 3 out of every 10 people who get tetanus die from it.

**Tetanus Fact:** Tetanus is different from the other diseases covered in this booklet because it is not contagious. People get it only from the environment and not from other people.

## Tetanus Immunization

As with the diphtheria vaccine, tetanus vaccine is really a toxoid, which protects against the toxin produced by tetanus bacteria.

Tetanus toxoid was first produced in 1924. It was used in the armed forces during World War II, and became a routine childhood shot in the late 1940's. At that time, about 400-500 tetanus cases were reported each year. By the mid-1970's this had dropped to 50-100 cases, and by the 1990's to between 40 and 50.

Tetanus toxoid is almost always given to children in DTaP vaccine, along with diphtheria and pertussis. [Click here to jump to the chapter about DTaP vaccine.](#)