



# Tetanus

## How to protect you and your family

Tetanus is a very severe, potentially fatal, disease that still occurs in Australia. Immunisation can prevent it.

## What causes tetanus?

Tetanus occurs when a germ called *Clostridium tetani* enters the body through damaged skin and produces a poison called tetanus toxin. This toxin is one of the most potent known poisons.

The tetanus germ is present in soil and manure. You cannot catch tetanus from other people.

The tetanus germ likes to grow away from the air.

## What are the most dangerous wounds for tetanus?

- Deep and dirty cuts.
- Punctures.
- Large burns.
- Wounds where broken bones damage the skin, or objects such as wood penetrate it.
- Even small wounds such as a prick from a thorn can let tetanus in, especially if dirty with soil or manure.

## What happens if you get tetanus?

From about three days to three weeks after the tetanus germ gets into the body, muscles become very stiff and go into painful spasms. For weeks, spasms can rack the body, which look like fits. The person may stop breathing, their heart beat and blood pressure can become disturbed.

Up to 10 per cent of people with tetanus in Australia will die, even with the best



of intensive care treatment.

## How can I protect myself from tetanus?

Fortunately immunisation against tetanus is very effective in preventing the disease.

The vaccine is called tetanus toxoid, and is available by itself, or in combination with other vaccines.

The vaccine is made by taking a small amount of the tetanus toxin and making it inactive. The body learns to recognise and attack this toxin, making antibodies to it. When the body meets the real tetanus toxin, these antibodies destroy it before any harm can be done.

## How often do I need to get a tetanus vaccination?

Everybody needs an initial course of three doses of the vaccine, to teach the immune system to recognise the tetanus toxin. Booster doses are then needed to help keep the body's memory active.

In Australia, children are vaccinated at:

- 2, 4, and 6 months,
- 4 years,
- and 15-17 years.

Tetanus and diphtheria boosters are no longer recommended every 10 years provided the person has documented evidence that they have completed a full primary course of three

injections and at least two booster doses, but a booster dose at 50 years is recommended.

If a person gets a wound that is considered more dangerous than usual, they may need another booster if they have not had one in the last five years.

## Who is most at risk from tetanus?

- People who have never been immunised.
- People who have not had enough doses of the vaccine.
- As people get older their immune systems may not work as well. Their immunity to tetanus may decrease if they do not have enough boosters. In Australia, most tetanus occurs in older adults.

## What should I do?

- Check with your family doctor or Public Health Unit if you are not sure whether you have had all the doses of tetanus vaccine you need.
- Make sure your children are immunised on time.
- If you are older than 50, check that you have had your tetanus booster.
- Seek medical advice quickly if you have a wound, particularly if it is deep or dirty.

Tetanus does not need to harm anyone in Australia anymore. Immunisation against tetanus is safe and effective. Make sure you and your family are protected.

