

Do I need a tetanus shot?

Author: Robert G. Good, DO, MACOI, Internal Medicine, Carle Mattoon

When is the last time you saw a person with Tetanus? The great majority of persons in the US have never seen or known about a person with tetanus. In my 42 year physician career I have seen 1 case. In the United States less than 30 cases are documented annually.

If this disease is so rare, why do we insist on tetanus shots?

However, globally 38,000 people died of tetanus last year and half of those persons were under 5 years of age (mainly infants). The death rate has decreased by 50% since 1990 related to improved vaccination rates. The majority of cases are in central Africa and Asia.

Tetanus is caused by a bacterial toxin that is found in dirt, and enters thru the skin from open wounds. Worldwide the most common transmission is from the wound associated with birth, causing non-immunized infants to get and succumb to the disease.

Tetanus has been known as “lock Jaw” due to the toxin effect on muscle contraction particularly of the neck and jaw. This leads to difficulty breathing and swallowing associated with excessive sweating and fever. There is no diagnostic test. The best method is prevention by tetanus vaccination and proper care of wounds, particularly puncture wounds. The tetanus immunization is part of routine care for children in the US in the form of DPT. Booster tetanus shots are recommended every 10 years to prevent the disease.

So you DO NEED a Tetanus shot if you have an injury or burn and have not received a vaccine in the last 10 years. Be sure to clean wounds carefully with soap and water – if that is not possible due to location or pain, seek medical attention.

For more information, please contact the Carle Center for Rural Health and Farm Safety at 217-902-3117 or visit www.carle.org/farmsafety.