

Drs Sparrow & Clayton, Stalbridge Surgery

INFORMATION LEAFLET- TETANUS FOR ADULTS

Tetanus is a very rare illness in the United Kingdom. Only 2 cases of tetanus were notified in England during 2002. The disease is more common in the summer months and most cases occur in unvaccinated people, usually over the age of 65 years of age. The disease used to be more common prior to the introduction of effective vaccination programmes. All children are now routinely offered vaccination against tetanus as part of their routine primary immunisation programme at 2,3 and 4 months. Older children are then offered booster doses prior to starting school and as teenagers to boost their long term immunity. Immunisation programmes for Tetanus were first introduced in 1961, so adults born before this time may not be immune to Tetanus. A very safe and effective vaccine is available called Td. This is a combined vaccine offering protection against both tetanus and diphtheria.

What causes the infection and how is it spread?

Tetanus is commonly referred to as "lockjaw". It is a bacterial disease, caused by the spores of a bacterium, called *Clostridium tetani*. These spores are most often found in the soil or faeces of domestic animals. The disease is caused by a powerful toxin that affects the nervous system. The toxin has the ability to inhibit nerve pathways, causing severe and painful muscle spasms of the jaw, neck and facial muscles. Infection begins when the bacterial spores are introduced into the body via a cut or wound from material contaminated with the bacterium. It is possible for a vaccinated person to get tetanus, but this is usually a milder form. Tetanus can be a very serious disease requiring hospitalisation with intensive support.

Person to person spread does not occur.

The incubation period is 3-21 days and is dependant upon the site of the wound and the extent of the contamination. Natural immunity may not always follow an attack of tetanus.

What are the symptoms of Tetanus

The most common signs of tetanus are a headache and muscle stiffness in the jaw (lockjaw), followed by stiffness of the neck, difficulty in swallowing, rigidity of abdominal muscles, spasms, sweating and fever. The symptoms usually begin about 8 days after the infection, but the incubation period as previously discussed can range from 3-21 days.

What can I do to protect myself against Tetanus?

Everyone should ensure they are immunised against tetanus. Vaccinations can be arranged at your GP surgery by making an appointment with the Practice Nurse.

Currently the recommended number of doses of tetanus vaccine is 5 and the vaccination schedule for previously unimmunised adults is:

- First dose immediately;
- Second dose one month later;
- Third dose one month later;
- Reinforcing dose ten years after the above course and again after a period of ten years.

REMEMBER DON'T DELAY, VACCINATE TODAY.

It's never too late!

Any wound should be thoroughly cleansed regardless of the person's immune status to tetanus.

Particular care should be taken with wounds sustained in the outdoor environment and advice should be sought from your Practice Nurse or GP in the following instances:

- Any wound sustained outside in a person with no previous vaccination against tetanus;
- Any wound with significant damage to tissues;
- Puncture type wound e.g. standing on rusty nails, garden forks etc.
- Wounds that have had contact with soil or manure;
- Wounds developing signs of infection e.g. swelling, redness, visible pus or slow to heal.

The Practice Nurse or GP will advise you if you need vaccination for tetanus.