

# Tetanus

Reviewed February 2013

## What is tetanus?

Tetanus is a serious disease caused by a toxin (poison) made by bacteria. It causes painful muscle stiffness and can be deadly. The DTaP and Tdap vaccines prevent tetanus.

## What are the symptoms of tetanus?

Tetanus in children starts with headache, jaw cramping, and muscle spasms (sudden, involuntary muscle tightening).

It also causes the following:

- Painful muscle stiffness all over the body
- Trouble swallowing
- Seizures (jerking or staring)
- Fever and sweating
- High blood pressure and fast heart rate

Tetanus is often called “lockjaw” because the jaw muscles tighten, and the person cannot open his mouth.

## How serious is tetanus?

Tetanus is very dangerous. It can cause breathing problems and paralysis (unable to move parts of the body). Muscle spasms can be strong enough to break a child’s spine or other bones.

It can take months to recover fully from tetanus. A child might need weeks of hospital care. As many as 1 out of 5 people who get tetanus dies.

## How does a person get tetanus?

The bacteria that cause tetanus are found in soil. They get into the body through a puncture of the skin. A person can also be infected after a burn or an animal bite.

Tetanus does not spread from one person to another.

## What is the DTaP vaccine?

The DTaP vaccine is a shot that combines the vaccines for tetanus and two other serious diseases: diphtheria and whooping cough (pertussis). The vaccine protects children by helping their bodies build up protection against the tetanus toxin.

## Benefits of the DTaP vaccine

- Saves lives.
- Protects young children from serious disease.

## Side effects of the DTaP vaccine

- The most common side effects are usually mild and occur in about 1 out of 4 children. They include the following:
  - Redness, swelling, and pain from the shot
  - Fever
  - Vomiting
- A fever over 105 degrees occurs in 1 out of 16,000 children.
- Nonstop crying for 3 hours or more occurs in about 1 out of 1,000 children.
- Seizures (jerking or staring) occur in about 1 out of 14,000 children. The seizures do not cause long-term harm.
- Serious reaction to the DTaP vaccine occurs in less than 1 in a million children.

Almost everyone who gets all doses of the DTaP vaccine will be protected against tetanus for at least 10 years.

## Why should my child get the DTaP vaccine?

Getting your child the DTaP vaccine helps protect him against painful and possibly deadly disease.

## When should my child get the DTaP vaccine?

Children should get five doses of the DTaP vaccine at the following ages for best protection:

- One dose each at 2 months, 4 months, and 6 months;
- A fourth dose at 15 through 18 months; and
- A fifth dose at 4 through 6 years of age.

It is safe to get the DTaP vaccine at the same time as other vaccines, even for babies.



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## Is the DTaP vaccine safe?

The DTaP vaccine is very safe, and it is effective at preventing tetanus (along with whooping cough and diphtheria). Vaccines, like any medicine, can have side effects. But severe side effects from the DTaP vaccine are very rare.

## If my child does not get the DTaP vaccine, will he get tetanus?

Children who have not had the DTaP vaccine and are exposed to the tetanus bacteria could get the disease.

Before the tetanus vaccine, there were more than 500 to 600 cases of tetanus reported each year in the U.S. Cases dropped steadily after the vaccine. Today, almost all cases of tetanus are among people who have never had the vaccine or adults who don't stay up to date on their 10-year booster shots.

## How can I learn more about the DTaP vaccine?

To learn more about the DTaP vaccine or other vaccines, talk to your child's doctor.

Call **800-CDC-INFO** (800-232-4636) or go to <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines> and check out the following resources:

- Vaccines and Preventable Disease—Tetanus (Lockjaw) Vaccination: <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/tetanus/default.htm>
- Infant Immunizations FAQs: <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/parents/parent-questions.html>
- Vaccines website for parents: <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/parents>

## What can I do to protect my child from tetanus?

- ✓ Vaccinate your child on time.
- ✓ Talk with your child's doctor if you have questions.
- ✓ Keep a record of your child's vaccinations to make sure your child is up-to-date.

## Booster vaccines needed to keep up protection from tetanus

The tetanus vaccine does not offer lifetime protection. People need booster vaccines to keep up protection from tetanus.

Children should get a booster vaccine called Tdap (which protects against tetanus, diphtheria, and whooping cough) at 11 or 12 years of age.

Adults need a booster called the Td vaccine (for tetanus and diphtheria) every 10 years. Adults should also receive a one-time shot of the Tdap vaccine in place of one Td shot.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, American Academy of Family Physicians, and American Academy of Pediatrics strongly recommend all children receive the DTaP vaccine according to the recommended schedule.