

Tetanus and the Vaccine (Shot) to Prevent It

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The best way to protect against tetanus is by getting the diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis shot (called DTaP). Doctors recommend that all children get the shot.

Why should my child get the DTaP shot?

The DTaP shot:

- Protects your child from tetanus, a potentially serious disease, as well as diphtheria and whooping cough (pertussis).
- Protects your child from painful muscle stiffness from tetanus.
- Keeps your child from missing school or childcare (and keeps you from missing work to care for your sick child).

Is the DTaP shot safe?

Yes. The DTaP shot is very safe, and it is effective at preventing tetanus. Vaccines, like any medicine, can have side effects. Most children who get the shot have no side effects.

What are the side effects?

Most children don't have any side effects from the shot. When side effects do occur, they are usually mild and may include:

- Redness, swelling, or pain where the shot was given
- Fever
- Vomiting

These types of side effects happen in about 1 out of every 4 children who get the shot.

More serious side effects are very rare but can include:

- A fever over 105 degrees
- Nonstop crying for 3 hours or more
- Seizures (jerking, twitching of the muscles, or staring)

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.

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
- Fever and sweating
- High blood pressure and fast heart rate

Tetanus is often called “lockjaw” because the jaw muscles tighten, making it hard to open the mouth.



Doctors recommend that your child get five doses of the DTaP vaccine for best protection. Your child will need one dose at each of the following ages:

- 2 months
- 4 months
- 6 months
- 15 through 18 months
- 4 through 6 years

Is it serious?

Tetanus is very dangerous. It can cause breathing problems, muscle spasms, 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 could my child get tetanus?

The bacteria that cause tetanus are found in soil, dust, and manure. They get into the body through a puncture, cut, or sore on the skin. A person can also be infected after a burn or an animal bite.

Tetanus does not spread from one person to another.

Where can I learn more about the DTaP shot and my child?

To learn more about the DTaP shot, talk to your child's doctor, call 1-800-CDC-INFO or visit www.cdc.gov/vaccines/parents.

Booster vaccines needed to keep up protection from tetanus

The DTaP shot does not offer lifetime protection. People need booster vaccines to maintain protection from tetanus.

Children should get a booster vaccine called Tdap (which helps protect against tetanus, diphtheria, and whooping cough) at 11 or 12 years old. Anyone who does not get Tdap at that age should get one dose as a replacement for their 10-year Td booster shot.

Adults need a booster called the Td vaccine (for tetanus and diphtheria) every 10 years.

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