

## Diphtheria and tetanus - for adults

Tetanus is caused when bacteria that live in soil, dust and manure enter the body through a break in the skin. Even a break as small as a pinprick can lead to tetanus infection. Tetanus is rare but can be fatal.

Diphtheria is spread through the coughs and sneezes of an infected person. Around 10 per cent of people exposed to diphtheria die from the disease.

### **Tetanus can be fatal**

Tetanus attacks the nervous system, leading to:

- Muscle spasms, which begin in the jaw and neck
- Breathing difficulties
- Painful convulsions
- Abnormal heart rhythms.

Tetanus is rare in Australia, but still occurs in adults who have never been immunised or who have not had their booster immunisation.

### **Diphtheria causes many problems**

Diphtheria infection can lead to:

- **Difficulty swallowing and breathing** – caused by a membrane that grows in the throat as a result of the infection. This can lead to suffocation.
- **Paralysis and heart failure** – occurs when a poison produced by the bacteria spreads around the body.

Diphtheria bacteria are found in the mouth, nose and throat.

### **Adult diphtheria and tetanus (ADT) vaccine**

Adults can be immunised against both tetanus and diphtheria with the Adult diphtheria and tetanus (ADT) vaccine.

- **If you have never been immunised** – adults and children over eight years who have never been immunised should receive three doses of ADT at one to two-month intervals, then two booster doses at 10-yearly intervals.
- **To maintain immunisation** – once you are fully immunised, you should receive a booster immunisation at 50 years of age.

ADT vaccine contains small amounts of modified (harmless) diphtheria and tetanus toxins, a preservative and a small amount of aluminium salt.

Young children should receive the combined diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis and polio (DTPaIPV) vaccine. The Better Health Channel factsheet 'Diphtheria tetanus pertussis polio vaccine – for children' has more information.

### **If you suffer an injury**

Some injuries can encourage the growth of tetanus organisms. If you suffer a tetanus-prone injury seek immediate advice from your doctor, who may recommend further vaccination.

Types of wounds likely to favor the growth of tetanus organisms include:

- Compound fractures

- Deep penetrating wounds
- Wounds containing foreign bodies
- Wounds with extensive tissue damage (such as burns)
- Superficial wounds obviously contaminated with soil, dust or horse manure.

### **Vaccine side effects are usually mild**

Side effects of vaccination can include:

- **Common reactions** – fever, pain, redness and swelling at the site of the injection.
- **Rare, severe reactions** – brachial neuritis (severe pain in the shoulder and upper arm) or severe allergic reaction.

### **Reducing fever and soreness after vaccination**

You can help prevent injection site soreness and fever by:

- Taking paracetamol (like Panadol) – check the recommended dose.
- Not overdressing
- Placing a wet cloth over the injection site.
- Drink extra fluids.

If you are worried about you or your child after immunisation, contact your doctor or hospital.

### **Pre-immunisation checklist**

Before immunisation, tell your doctor or nurse if you or your child:

- Have had a tetanus-containing vaccine in the past five years
- Are unwell on the day of immunisation (temperature over 38.5C)
- Have had a serious reaction to any vaccine
- Have any allergies.

### **Where to get help**

- Your doctor
- Nurse on Call Tel. 1300 606 024 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- Department of Human Services Victoria – Immunisation Program. Tel 1300 882 008
- Your local government's immunisation service.

### **Things to remember**

- Diphtheria and tetanus can lead to death.
- Serious side effects of immunisation are rare.
- After you are properly immunised, you will need a booster immunisation at 50 years of age.

### **Want to know more?**

Go to More information for support groups, related links and references.

### **This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

DHS - Communicable Disease Control

**Copyright** © 1999/2008 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel ([www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.

- This Better Health Channel fact sheet has passed through a rigorous approval process. For the latest updates and more information visit [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au).

**Would you like to share this fact sheet with others?**

Show me how to link to this fact sheet | Close