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Tetanus

Description:

Tetanus is caused by a toxin produced by the bacterium, Clostridium tetani. These bacteria are common in the environment and are found in soil, dust and manure. The bacteria can contaminate wounds, where they produce the toxin which causes the symptoms of tetanus.

Unvaccinated people are at risk of developing tetanus if a wound or cut is contaminated by the bacteria. About 3% of people who develop tetanus in Australia will die as a result of the disease. The death rate is much higher in places overseas where there is not as good access to medical care.

Due to the availability of a very effective tetanus vaccine and widespread immunisation, tetanus is now a rare disease.

Symptoms:

Tetanus is an acute disease characterised by painful muscular contractions and spasms. Involvement of the muscles of the jaw and neck has led to tetanus also being known as lock jaw. Older children and adults may present with abdominal rigidity due to involvement of the muscles of the trunk.

Transmission

Tetanus is not directly transmitted from person to person. It is contracted through a cut or wound which becomes contaminated by the bacteria. It can enter the body through even a minor injury, but deep puncture wounds or cuts are more likely to become infected.

The time from exposure to the bacteria and the development of symptoms is usually about 10 days, but it can be longer.

Treatment:

The treatment for tetanus involves giving tetanus antitoxin to combat the toxins produced by the infecting bacteria. Management of the case is generally undertaken in a hospital intensive care facility because the case will have difficulty breathing and muscle spasms need to be controlled.

As recovery from tetanus may not result in immunity, an important part of the treatment is to ensure that the person starts a course of vaccination to prevent them from contracting tetanus in the future.

Prevention:

Vaccination is the best way to protect against tetanus. Tetanus vaccination (often combined with other vaccines is recommended as follows:

- all children at 2, 4 and 6 months of age with a booster dose at 4 years of age
- year 10 students (booster)
- all adults aged 50 years and over who have not received a booster dose in the previous 10 years
- adults with a tetanus prone wound should receive a booster dose if more than 5 years have elapsed since the last tetanus dose.
- travellers to countries where health services are difficult to access should be protected before departure.

Any wound should be cleaned thoroughly with soap and water. If a person gets a tetanus-prone wound and has had no tetanus booster doses in the previous 5 years, or has never completed the 3 dose course of tetanus vaccination, medical attention should be sought immediately. Tetanus immunoglobulin is required, as well as vaccination, for anyone with a tetanus prone wound who has received less than 3 doses of tetanus vaccine in their lifetime.

Help and Assistance

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For further information, please contact your local doctor, community health centre, nearest public health unit or the 13HEALTH (13 43 25 84) information line.

References

Heymann, D., ed. 2008. *Control of Communicable Diseases Manual*, 19th edition. Washington, DC: American Public Health Association.

National Health and Medical Research Council, 2008. *The Australian Immunisation Handbook* (9th edition).

Related Content

Tetanus and immunisation fact sheet

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