

# TETANUS

Tetanus is a bacterial infection that can cause serious disease, especially in those persons who have not been vaccinated. Tetanus infections are caused by the bacterium *Clostridium tetani*, a bacterium that is normally found in the soil. Normally, the skin provides protection against this type of infection, however, when there is a break in the skin due to a cut or abrasion, the bacteria can enter the tissues and bloodstream and cause disease. Vaccination against tetanus is part of the routine childhood vaccination schedule in the United States. Adults should be vaccinated against tetanus every 5 to 10 years.



Floodwaters contain many bacteria and parasites, including *Clostridium*. Therefore, contact with floodwater should be minimized through the use of personal protection equipment such as boots and gloves. For those homeowners who must work in and around floodwater, we strongly recommend a call to your doctor to check your immunization status against tetanus. If you have had the vaccine within the last five years, your immune levels should be sufficient to protect you against infection. If you have not had the vaccine within the last five years, you should contact your doctor or the health department to be vaccinated as soon as possible.

Those persons who have a cut, wound or any break in the skin should avoid contact with floodwater *completely*. If you sustain a wound while working in or around floodwater, please adhere to the following steps to reduce the risk of developing tetanus or other skin infections:

- Rinse the wound immediately with clean water. If there is any chance your water may be contaminated, use bottled or distilled water. Cleanse the area around the wound with antibacterial soap and water, removing any dirt or debris with tweezers. If the debris is not easily removed, call your doctor for assistance. Do not use other antibacterial cleansing compounds on the wound itself as it may irritate the wound.
- Call your doctor if the wound is deep, dirty, due to an animal bite or if you are unsure of your immunization status with respect to tetanus.
- Apply an antibiotic ointment after cleansing the wound. Remember that this ointment will not help the wound to heal faster, but will prevent additional bacteria from infecting the wound. Again, if the wound is deep or dirty you still need to see your doctor.
- Initially cover the wound to keep the area clean and free from bacteria. As the wound heals and a scab forms, you can remove the bandage and allow the wound to be exposed to the air.
- Keep the bandage and wound clean. You should change the bandage at least daily, or anytime the bandage becomes dirty or wet.

**Following these simple steps will reduce the likelihood that your wound will become infected with tetanus or any other type of bacteria. Remember, adults need routine vaccinations too, and tetanus vaccine is one of them!**