

# HEALTH ALERT!

## Most Adults Lack Protection Against Tetanus and Diphtheria

(NAPSA)—Two potentially fatal infections—tetanus and diphtheria—frequently don't get the respect they deserve, possibly because the US has done such a good job of controlling them. While nearly every child in our country is protected against these two diseases, more than half of American adults do not have protective antibody levels against them. The likely reason for this lack of protection is that these adults may never have been immunized to begin with or have failed to get their routine booster shots every ten years.

"Over the last few decades, we've become very good at immunizing our children against all sorts of infectious diseases, but protection from childhood vaccines against tetanus and diphtheria doesn't last forever," says Dr. Richard Clover, dean of the School of Public Health at the University of Louisville. "Half the people in this country over 20 years of age are no longer protected. What's most worrisome is that you can contract tetanus from a wound as simple as a splinter, and there are plenty of countries in our ever-shrinking world where diphtheria is still passed from person to person."

### Boosters Needed

Vaccinations against tetanus and diphtheria have been widespread in American children since the late 1940s, and when given properly, both vaccines are at least 97 percent effective. About 10 years after receiving the last childhood vaccination for tetanus and diphtheria, the levels of protective antibodies will fall. This is why everyone should get a booster immunization of the combined vaccines, sometimes referred to as "Td," that is formulated for adolescents and adults. Every 10 years thereafter, adults should continue to boost their immunity with Td.

Despite the official recommendations for tetanus vaccination, from 1993 through 2000 there were 342 reported cases of tetanus in the US, and 70 percent of the cases from 1980 through 2000 were among persons 40 years of age or older. According to Dr.



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Clover these numbers illustrate what may happen when adults fail to get a primary series of vaccinations or maintain their immunity with routine boosters. "Tetanus requires more than just caring for a rusty nail wound; adults need to keep their immunizations up-to-date so that the vaccine can prevent infections that could take hold from relatively minor cuts and scrapes that may not be treated by a doctor," he says.

### Tetanus/Diphtheria

The most common form of tetanus causes paralysis, usually starting at the top of the body and working its way down. Lockjaw is often the first sign of the disease, followed by stiffness in the neck and trouble swallowing. Symptoms can appear anywhere from three days to three weeks after exposure to tetanus bacteria, which is commonly found in soil and can enter the body through any wound, large or small.

Virtually all US cases of tetanus are due to people being not immunized at all or under-immunized. Although tetanus cases in the US have decreased dramatically over the years, the disease can still be very difficult to treat. Even with proper treatment, it is fatal for approximately one out of every 10 people infected in this country. Therefore, it is

important for adults to know their vaccination status and make sure they get the tetanus-diphtheria booster immunization every 10 years to stay protected.

Diphtheria is spread from person to person and caused by bacteria that infect the throat and nasal passages; like tetanus, it can be fatal if left untreated. The disease is still common in some other countries, and strains of the bacteria continue to circulate in some parts of the US. Maintaining up-to-date immunity with a Td booster keeps the disease from recurring among the general domestic population and protects people who travel to 87 countries where the risk of diphtheria exposure is high.

### Adult Vaccination

Some adults, mainly those over 60 years of age, may never have received a primary series of tetanus and diphtheria shots because they were not routinely given when they were children. These folks are likely to need a full adult series of three vaccine doses, followed by booster immunizations every 10 years.

The CDC recently adopted its first adult immunization schedule that combines the recommendations of the Federal government, the American Academy of Family Physicians and the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology. It provides health professionals with a coordinated guide of how and when to administer the eight recommended vaccines for patients 19 years and older and includes instructions on how to use the combined tetanus and diphtheria vaccine for the primary immunization series as well as routine 10-year boosters.

According to Dr. Clover, the US needs to be better at protecting adults against both tetanus and diphtheria or they could return as real public health problems. He advises people who can't remember the last time they received a Td booster or are not sure if they've ever been immunized to call a doctor today and schedule an appointment to get the shot. For more information about tetanus and diphtheria, check out the CDC's Web site at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov).