



## Advice to injecting drug users on tetanus

### What is the problem?

- During 2003 a cluster of tetanus cases occurred in injecting drug users. Before 2003, the incidence of tetanus was low in the United Kingdom, with occasional cases predominantly in unvaccinated elderly persons. Between July 2003 and September 2004, 25 tetanus cases were reported in injecting drug users; two of these patients died. Cases continue to appear sporadically, so you need to watch out.
- You need to know the symptoms because if tetanus is suspected early, life saving treatment can be given in hospital.
- The first symptoms of tetanus are stiff muscles near the wound (or injection site) followed by stiffening of other muscles and of the jaw until you can't open your mouth ('lockjaw'). This can be followed by frequent and painful spasms. The illness can progress for about 2 weeks. The muscle spasms can affect your breathing and your heart, which can be fatal.
- Tetanus is caused by bacteria getting into the body through a wound or through injecting drugs. It is caught from tetanus bacteria in soil or dirt or in drugs, rather than from other people. Onset of symptoms occurs usually around 10 days after infection, but this can range from 1 day to several months.
- Tetanus is seen often in America, where people use different types of heroin. It happens mostly in people who inject drugs in the muscle or below the skin ('skin popping').
- Tetanus can be prevented by vaccination. Anyone who is not fully protected against tetanus by immunisation is at risk from the disease. Injecting drugs may put you at risk of tetanus regardless of your immunisation status; although when you've been fully immunised (5 doses in the past) the severity will be much less.
- Tetanus can't be caught by having sex with or living with a person who has the infection.

### What to do to reduce your risk of getting this infection:

- There is no way that you can tell if your drugs are likely to cause this infection.
- When using drugs, smoking is safer than injecting. If you must inject, do not inject into muscle or under the skin: make sure you hit the vein - your blood is better at killing bacteria than your muscle.
- Don't share needles, syringes, cookers/spoons or other 'works' with other drug users.
- Use as little citric acid as possible. A lot of citric acid can damage the muscle or the flesh under the skin, and this damage gives bacteria a better chance to grow.
- If you inject more than one type of drug, inject each at a separate place on your body and with clean works for each injection. This is important because certain drugs could give bacteria a better chance to grow.
- **Check whether you've had the 5 recommended doses of tetanus vaccine (3 as part of childhood immunisations, and 2 booster doses later). If you have not had all 5 doses, or are not sure, please discuss with your GP or with a drug advisory centre whether you need more doses of tetanus vaccine.**

### What to watch out for:

- **If you get stiff muscles near where you inject, stiffening in the jaw, stomach or back, or problems swallowing or breathing, you should get a doctor (in A&E or a GP) to check it out immediately and tell them that you are worried you may have tetanus.**