

Tetanus

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A recent case of tetanus in a three year old filly is a reminder that tetanus spores are always around and all species, including us, are susceptible to this disease. The classic tetanus wound is a deep penetrating wound like a stake wound but with lambs and calves it is common after castration. In the filly's case, it originated from a foot abscess; a common enough condition that is generally not regarded as life threatening.

Tetanus is **caused** by the toxin produced by bacteria called *Clostridium tetani*. These bacteria also produce spores which are very resistant and can last for years in the soil. (Spores in horse dung left by Captain Scott's horses in the Antarctic in 1910 have been found to be still viable!)

When a wound is contaminated with these spores it takes about ten to fourteen days for **symptoms** to show. They are muscle spasms affecting the head first, hence the old name "lock jaw", with a change in facial expression, prolapse of the third eyelid and erect ears. I find the prolapse of both third eyelids across the eyes the most reliable early symptom. The contractions then spread to affect the whole body with rigid limbs, neck, convulsions and death. If diagnosed early treatment can be successful but it is difficult and protracted, so in advanced cases euthanasia is often the most humane option.

There are very **effective vaccines** (**Tetanus toxoid**) available for all species which provide good long term protection. But don't get them confused with **tetanus antitoxin** which is used where there is already a wound in unvaccinated animals or where we don't know if the animal has been vaccinated or not. Tetanus antitoxin provides rapid but short term protection of about three weeks and is used commonly in lambs and calves at docking and in unvaccinated horses whenever we have a wound.

We don't actually see many cases of tetanus when you consider the number of wounds horses and other animals sustain, but it is such a cruel, cruel disease. When you have seen tetanus, you would never put off vaccinating.