



Australian Government

Australian Institute of
Health and Welfare

Tetanus in Australia

Quick facts

The number of tetanus deaths has fallen since vaccination was introduced in the early 1950s.

Tetanus infection is now rare in Australia, mostly occurring in older adults who are not adequately vaccinated.

What is tetanus?

Tetanus is an acute, sometimes fatal bacterial disease caused by toxins produced by *Clostridium tetani*. These bacteria are widespread in the environment including in soil and manure. It usually enters the blood stream through broken skin.

Tetanus is not contagious and cannot be passed from person to person.

Early symptoms of tetanus infection include stiffness of the jaw muscles ('lockjaw'), difficulty in swallowing, and stiffness or pain in the neck, shoulders and back. This progresses to general muscle stiffness, severe and painful spasms and breathing difficulties.

Vaccination against tetanus

Widespread vaccination against tetanus was introduced in Australia from 1953. The Australian National Immunisation Program provides tetanus vaccination for infants, young children and through state and territory school vaccination programs. Adults who reach the age of 50 years without having received a booster dose in the previous 10 years should receive a tetanus booster dose.

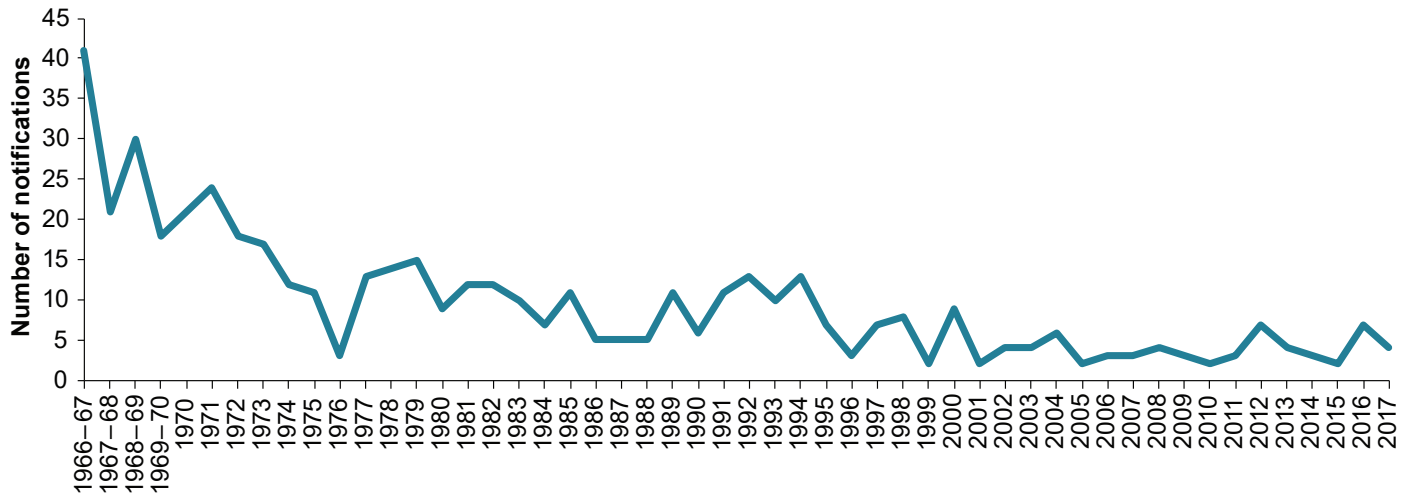
Vaccination is important because the bacterium which causes tetanus is commonly found in soil.

In 2017, 94% of Australian 5 year olds were fully vaccinated against tetanus; however, vaccination rates vary by where a child lives.

Tetanus notifications

Tetanus is a nationally notifiable disease in Australia, which means that diagnosed cases of tetanus are reported to state or territory health departments.

The number of reported tetanus cases decreased after vaccination was introduced in the early 1950s. In 2017, 4 notifications of tetanus were reported. Since 1995, fewer than 10 cases have been reported each year, with about two-thirds (62%) of these being in people aged 65 and older.



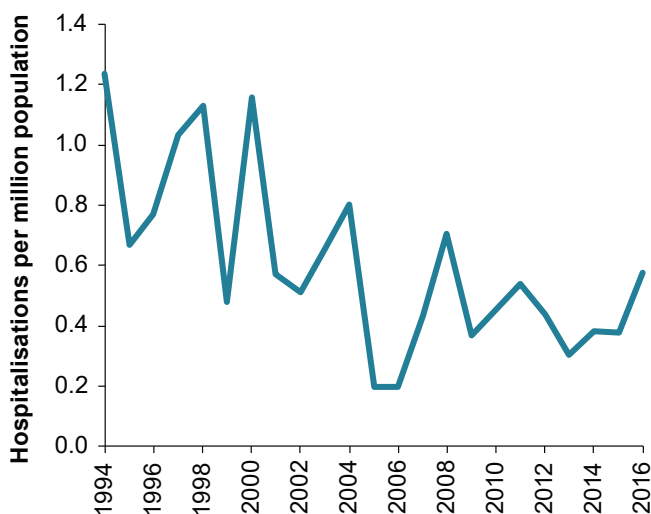
Note: Tetanus was not notifiable in all states and territories prior to 1966.

Sources: AIHW analysis of NNDSS data extracted on 03 August 2018; Hall R 1993. Notifiable diseases surveillance, 1917 to 1991. Communicable Diseases Intelligence 17:226-236.

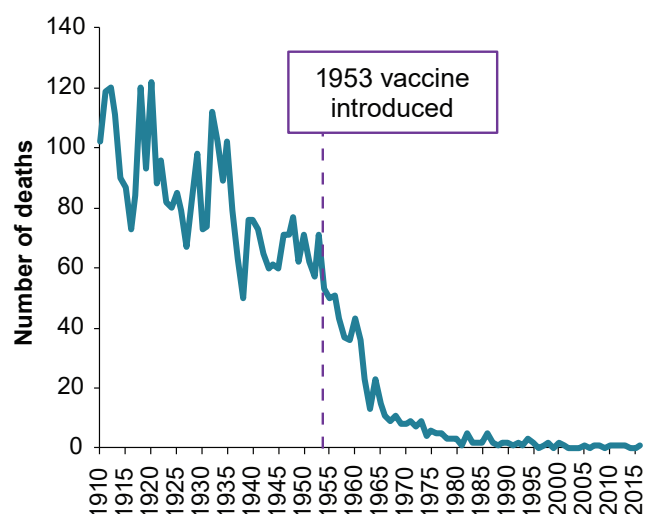
Hospitalisations and deaths due to tetanus

In 2016, there were 14 hospital admissions for tetanus in Australia. Since 1994, there have been fewer than 2 tetanus hospital admissions per million population each year (left figure).

Between 1997 and 2016, tetanus caused 14 deaths in Australia. The number of deaths has fallen considerably since tetanus vaccination was introduced for children in the early 1950s (right figure). Most (90%) of the 30 deaths in the past 30 years have occurred in people aged 65 years and older, who may not have been vaccinated at all or recently.



Source: AIHW analysis of National Hospital Morbidity Database.



Sources: AIHW analysis of National Mortality database; AIHW 2010 GRIM books

This fact sheet is part of the [Vaccine-preventable diseases](#) release. For more information see [Immisation](#) on the AIHW website.

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