

When Cuts Can Kill Your Dog

Tetanus rarely strikes dogs, but symptoms call for swift action.

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Jennifer Larrabee of Attleboro, Mass., will never forget Thanksgiving week 2003. The Monday before the holiday, Larrabee's 1-year-old Mastiff, Munci, began vomiting. On Tuesday, his legs became stiff and his face rigid. He looked like he had an extreme face-lift, Larrabee says. He couldn't open his mouth and had trouble breathing. Munci was quickly admitted at the local veterinary hospital, where he received treatment for a possible infection or allergic reaction.

But Munci didn't respond, and on Thanksgiving night Larrabee received a call from the veterinarian. Munci was having seizures, too sick for the clinic to manage. Even a nearby emergency hospital said he was too ill to care for.

The emergency veterinarian referred Larrabee to Angell Animal Medical Center in Boston, which offers advanced specialty services in addition to routine veterinary care. Munci was having great difficulty in breathing, and I didn't think he would survive the car ride to Boston, Larrabee says.

At Angell, S. Anna Pesillo, VMD, an American College of Veterinary Emergency and Critical Care diplomate, performed an emergency tracheotomy on Munci and diagnosed the dangerously ill Mastiff as having tetanus, contracted from a cut on a rear toe.

Rarely Seen A potentially fatal infection, tetanus occurs after the bacterium *Clostridium tetani*, spores of which are present in soils throughout the world, invades a wound. When the spores are introduced into the body through penetrating injuries, they reproduce at the site of injury, releasing a toxin that causes nerve damage, explains Michael S. Stone, DVM, an American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine diplomate and a clinical assistant professor at Tufts University's Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine. The toxin either remains localized and close to the wound, resulting in stiffness of a single limb, or spreads throughout the body, producing a generalized form of the disease in which the muscles contract and extreme muscular rigidity develops. When this happens, dogs often demonstrate a stiff gait with an outstretched tail, developing a kind of sawhorse stance. They have difficulty standing or lying down in comfortable positions, Stone says. The ears are held erect, the lips are drawn back, and the forehead is often wrinkled. Various muscle groups can be affected, so the dog may be unable to open her mouth and may experience respiratory problems, difficulty in urination, or painful muscle spasms.