

## Patient information factsheet

# Clostridioides difficile

We have written this factsheet to give you more information about *Clostridioides difficile*. It explains what *Clostridioides difficile* is, how it is treated, and how to prevent it from spreading during your stay in hospital and at home. We hope it will help to answer some of the questions you may have. If you have any further questions or concerns, please speak to a member of your healthcare team.

### What is *clostridioides difficile*?

*Clostridioides difficile* (known as *C. difficile*) is a type of bacteria (germ) that can live naturally in the gut. Approximately 3% of healthy adults and up to 66% of children have *C. difficile* in their gut without it causing any harm. However, in some cases, *C. difficile* can cause infection.

### Why does *C. difficile* cause infection?

In healthy people, *C. difficile* lives in balance with many 'good bacteria' in the bowel and does not cause any harm.

Sometimes the balance of *C. difficile* and good bacteria can be disrupted (for example, when you take antibiotics). If the number of good bacteria is reduced, *C. difficile* can multiply rapidly and produce toxins. These toxins can inflame the bowel and cause diarrhoea.

In most cases, the effects of a *C. difficile* infection are relatively mild, but it can sometimes lead to serious illness.

### Who is at risk?

You are more at risk of developing a *C. difficile* infection if you:

- are over the age of 65
- are taking or have had antibiotics or other medications that alter the bacteria in the gut
- have an immune system which is not working properly
- have had gut surgery
- have inflammatory bowel disease

### What are the symptoms?

The most common symptoms of a *C. difficile* infection include:

- mild to severe diarrhoea (often watery)
- a fever
- a loss of appetite
- nausea (feeling sick)
- tummy pain or tenderness

Occasionally, some people may experience severe bowel inflammation.

If you are in hospital and experience any of the symptoms above, please let a member of staff know immediately. Symptoms of a *C. difficile* infection usually last for seven to 10 days.

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However, in some cases, they may settle within two days or last longer than 10 days. If your symptoms start again, tell a nurse or doctor (or your GP if you are at home), as you may need more treatment.

## How is *C. difficile* diagnosed?

We usually diagnose the infection by testing a sample of faeces (poo) in a laboratory to see whether the *C. difficile* toxin is present. If we find traces of the toxin, your doctor will make sure you receive appropriate treatment.

## How is *C. difficile* treated?

Depending on your symptoms, we may prescribe you a course of antibiotics to treat the *C. difficile* infection. The course of antibiotics will be between 10 and 14 days long. It is important that you complete the course of antibiotics even if your diarrhoea settles, or your symptoms may return.

Most people with a *C. difficile* infection make a full recovery. Some people may have further episodes of diarrhoea and will need to have additional treatment for this. A very small number of people with a *C. difficile* infection may develop colitis (a severe infection of the large bowel) and may need surgery.

It is important that you tell your nurse, doctor or GP if you have diarrhoea again, as we need to record the number of times diarrhoea occurs and what it looks like. If you are taking antibiotics for other infections, your doctor will need to review these, as they may be making the diarrhoea worse. If you have diarrhoea, you will need to drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration (when your body loses more fluids than you take in), as this can become a serious problem.

## How is *C. difficile* spread?

*C. difficile* can spread easily to other people because the bacteria are passed out of the body in a person's diarrhoea. Once outside of the body, the bacteria take the form of spores (bacteria with a protective coating). These spores can survive for long periods on hands, surfaces (such as toilets, commodes and bed frames), objects and clothing unless they're thoroughly cleaned, and can infect someone else if they get into their mouth.

*C. difficile* can also be spread through direct contact with someone who is infected. Someone with a *C. difficile* infection is generally considered to be infectious until at least 48 hours after their symptoms have cleared up.

## How can the spread of *C. difficile* be prevented?

### Isolation

If you have diarrhoea in hospital, we may move you to a single room and care for you in isolation to prevent *C. difficile* spreading to other people. In most cases, you will need to stay in a single room until you have had no symptoms for 48 hours and your bowel motions have returned to normal.

If several people are diagnosed with a *C. difficile* infection while in hospital, we may move you all to a same-sex bay where we can care for you together.

### Hygiene

Good hygiene is especially important in preventing the spread of *C. difficile*. We will wear gloves and aprons when caring for you. We will also always wash our hands with soap and water after coming into contact with you or your surroundings. We will also provide you with

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your own commode (a chair with a hidden toilet) to use (if your isolation room is not en-suite).

All our hospital wards and equipment are cleaned to the highest standards. Please speak to the nurse in charge if you have any questions or concerns.

To prevent the spread of *C. difficile* you should:

- use soap and water to wash your hands (alcohol hand gel is not effective against *C. difficile* spores)
- always wash your hands with soap and water after using the toilet and before eating
- ask the nursing staff on the ward if you need help washing your hands (hand wipes are also available)
- make sure that visitors who come into contact with you or your surroundings wash their hands with soap and water before they leave the room
- clean surfaces in bathrooms, kitchens and other areas at home regularly, using household detergent or disinfectants

## Visitors

Your family and friends can visit you in hospital, but we do not encourage children and babies to visit. People who are unwell themselves should not visit. If your visitor has had a recent infection or illness, or has a medical problem which makes them vulnerable to infection, they should check with your doctor or nurse before visiting you.

Visitors should:

- use the alcohol hand rub provided before they enter your room and when they leave the ward
- wash their hands with soap and water before they leave your room or bay
- wear gloves and aprons if they help with your personal care during their visit (they must then put their gloves and aprons in an orange waste bin in the room, and wash their hands with soap and water afterwards)

## What will happen when I leave hospital?

When you go home, you can go back to a basic hand hygiene routine (for example, washing your hands after going to the toilet, and before preparing and eating food).

Contact your GP if you have diarrhoea again after leaving hospital. If you are re-admitted to hospital or admitted to another hospital, please tell a member of staff that you have had a *C. difficile* infection.

## Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns, please speak to a member of the nursing or medical team caring for you.

## Useful links

[www.nhs.uk/conditions/c-difficile](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/c-difficile)

[www.nhs.uk/conditions/diarrhoea-and-vomiting](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/diarrhoea-and-vomiting)

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