

Patient information factsheet

Clostridium difficile

Clostridium 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 infants have *C. difficile* in their gut without it causing any harm. In some cases, however, *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.

You are more at risk of developing *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 undergone gut surgery
- have inflammatory bowel disease

Symptoms

- mild to severe diarrhoea, often watery
- (occasionally) severe inflammation of the bowel.
- fever
- loss of appetite
- nausea
- abdominal pain or tenderness

If you are in hospital, report any diarrhoea or vomiting to a member of staff immediately.

Symptoms usually last for seven to 10 days, but in some cases they can 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.

Diagnosing *C. difficile*

We usually diagnose the infection by testing a sample of faeces in a lab 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.

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Treatment and care

Depending on your symptoms, we may prescribe you a course of antibiotics to treat the *C. difficile* infection. Treatment lasts for 10 to 14 days. It is important that you complete the course of antibiotics even if your diarrhoea settles. Otherwise symptoms may re-occur.

Most patients with *C. difficile* make a full recovery. Some patients may have further episodes of diarrhoea and will need more treatment for this. A very small number of patients with *C. difficile* infection may develop severe infection of the large bowel known as "colitis" which may require surgery.

Make sure you tell your nurse, doctor or GP if you have diarrhoea again. We will need to record the number of times diarrhoea occurs and what it looks like

Your doctor will need to review any antibiotics you are taking for other infections, as they may be making the diarrhoea worse.

If you have diarrhoea, make sure you drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration (lack of fluids).

How does *C. difficile* spread?

C. difficile can spread easily. In diarrhoea it takes the form of "spores" (bacteria with a protective coating) which are designed to survive outside the human body.

When someone has diarrhoea, these spores can contaminate the environment and often live in areas such as toilets, commodes and bed frames. If the area isn't thoroughly cleaned, spores can survive for a very long time and can be a source of infection to other people.

C. difficile can also spread on your hands if you have direct contact with someone who is infected or if you touch contaminated surfaces. If you then touch your mouth, you may swallow the spores.

Preventing the spread of *C. difficile*

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 there are several people with the same diagnosis we may move you all to a same-sex bay where we can care for you together.

Hygiene

Hygiene is especially important in preventing the spread of *C. difficile*. Staff will wear gloves and aprons when caring for you and always wash their hands with soap and water after coming into contact with you or your surroundings. We will also allocate a commode or toilet for your use only.

Hospital wards and equipment should always be cleaned to the highest standards. Please ask 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, but we do not encourage children and babies to visit hospitals. People who are unwell themselves should not visit. If a visitor has had a recent infection or illness, or has a medical problem which makes them vulnerable to infection, they should check with the nurse before visiting.

Visitors should:

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

Leaving hospital

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

Contact your GP if you have diarrhoea again after you come home from 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.

Useful links

NHS Choices: www.nhs.uk/conditions/gastroenteritis/Pages/Introduction.aspx

Public Health England: www.gov.uk/government/organisations/public-health-england

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns, please speak to a member of staff on the ward.

If you need a translation of this document, an interpreter or a version in large print, Braille or on audio tape, please telephone 023 8120 4688 for help.