

## Clostridium difficile

### What is Clostridium difficile?

Clostridium difficile (commonly called C. diff) is a spore forming bacteria present in the bowel of approximately 3% of healthy adults. It rarely causes problems as it is kept under control by the normal bacteria in the bowel. However, when certain antibiotics are given, the balance of bacteria in the bowel can be disturbed, causing C. diff to multiply rapidly and produce toxins. These toxins are chemicals which can damage the lining of the bowel, resulting in diarrhoea. This is called C. diff infection.

### What are the symptoms of C. diff infection?

Symptoms include diarrhoea (with or without mucus or blood), abdominal pain and fever.

Rarely, severe inflammation of the bowel can occur. If not treated, this may cause damage to the bowel (which may need surgery), or very rarely, lead to perforation of the bowel and death.

### Who does it affect and are some people more at risk?

The main factors which increase the risk of a person developing C. diff infection include:

- Abdominal surgery
- Antibiotic exposure
- Long length of stay in healthcare settings
- Serious underlying illness
- Advanced age

Over 80% of cases are reported in the over 65 age group. Patients with a compromised immune system are also at risk.

### How can it be treated?

C. diff can be treated with specific antibiotics. It is important that the whole course of antibiotics is completed even if the symptoms get better. The infection has gone when normal, formed stools are passed for 72 hours. There is however a risk of relapse in up to 40% of patients.

### Infection control precautions

Although C. diff infection is normally a result of antibiotic therapy, it is possible for it to spread from person to person. This may occur because C. diff spores found in the faeces of infected patients can spread into the environment. These spores can survive for a long time and contaminate the environment, particularly flat surfaces, equipment, bathrooms, toilets and shower facilities.

To avoid the spread of infection strict hygiene measures and thorough cleaning are essential.

**Hand washing, using soap and water, is extremely important.** Alcohol gel is not effective at killing *C. diff* spores. Healthcare staff must wash their hands after every patient contact. Patients should wash their hands with soap and water after using the toilet, before preparing food and before eating.

In hospital, patients with *C. diff* diarrhoea will be nursed in a single room with either en suite facilities or their own commode.

To avoid the spread of infection, staff caring for the patient will also wear aprons and gloves.

Patients are required to remain in the single room or bay until they have passed normal stools for 72 hours.

## **How can my family/visitors protect themselves when visiting?**

- Hands must be washed with soap and water on entering and when leaving ward areas. Visitors do not need to wear gloves and aprons when visiting.
- Do not visit if you are feeling unwell or have recently had diarrhoea.
- Avoid sitting on hospital beds when visiting.
- Observe any visiting restrictions in place as these help us to make sure the ward is cleaned thoroughly throughout the day.
- Wash hands with soap and water after using the toilet, before eating and before preparing food.
- Do not bring in food to eat whilst visiting.

## **What precautions are needed at home?**

If you are well, having *C. diff* will not stop you from going home.

Good hygiene practice should continue at home, including hand washing after using the toilet, before eating and before preparing food.

Bathrooms, showers and toilets (including taps, toilet doors, toilet flush handles etc) should be kept clean, using a bleach solution.

Clothes should be washed at the hottest temperature the manufacturer's recommend (60°C if the clothes will tolerate it) and either tumble dried or ironed. Your clothes should, ideally, not be washed with other members of the family's clothes.

**If you develop diarrhoea again once you have left hospital you must contact your GP**, who should start treatment. It is not necessary for you to be admitted back to hospital unless you need hospital treatment.

## **Useful contact**

**National Patient Safety Agency:** [www.npsa.nhs.uk](http://www.npsa.nhs.uk)

If you have any queries, or require further information  
please speak to your nurse or doctor.

Alternatively you may wish to arrange to talk to an Infection Control Specialist.  
To do so, please ask ward or department staff to arrange this.

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