

Clostridium difficile

Patient Information Leaflet



What is *Clostridium difficile*?

Clostridium difficile (*C. diff*) is a bacterium (germ) that is present naturally in the gut of around two-thirds of children and 3% of adults.

How do you develop an infection?

C. diff does not cause any problems in healthy people. However, some antibiotics that are used to treat other health conditions can interfere with the balance of 'good' bacteria in the gut. When this happens, *C. diff* bacteria can multiply and produce toxins (poisons) which cause illness such as diarrhoea and fever. At this point, a person is said to be infected with *C. diff*.

Who is affected?

As *C. diff* infections are usually caused by antibiotics, most cases happen in a healthcare environment such as a hospital or care homes. Older people are most at risk from infection and most cases occur in people aged over 65. Children under the age of two are not usually affected.

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

- The effects of *C. diff* can vary from nothing, through to diarrhoea of varying severity.
- Other symptoms can include fever, loss of appetite, nausea and abdominal pain or tenderness.
- Rarely, there can be severe inflammation of the bowel and occasionally, infections may be life threatening.

How is *C. diff* infection diagnosed?

The infection is normally diagnosed by carrying out laboratory tests on the patient's faeces to see if *C. diff* toxin is present.

How is it treated?

- Stopping the offending antibiotic (where possible) may help in some very mild cases. However, often it is necessary to take an antibiotic to treat *C. diff* itself.
- Patients with *C. diff* infections will be given specific antibiotics and most patients will make a full recovery. Elderly patients with other underlying conditions may have a more prolonged and severe course of illness.

- Other treatments may be used, including pro-biotic treatments (“good bacteria”), with the aim of re-establishing the normal bacteria in the gut.
- While a patient has diarrhoea, it is important that they continue to receive enough fluid and nutrition (food). Staff will monitor and document this daily and if necessary a patient will be given fluid through a vein (a “drip”) or nutritional supplements, for example in the form of drinks.

How else might this affect my care?

- You will be nursed in a single room, preferably with your own toilet facilities or in a room with other patients who also have *C. diff* infection.
- Staff will use soap and water to clean their hands, not alcohol hand rub. This is because alcohol hand rub does not kill *C. diff* spores.
- All staff attending to you will wear gloves and a plastic apron and these will be removed and their hands cleaned before they attend to another patient.
- If you are in a single room, the staff will keep the door shut and there will be a notice on the door in order to inform staff that they must take special precautions if they are coming to see you.
- Special attention will be given to cleaning your room and any medical equipment used in order to ensure that all spores and bacteria are regularly removed.

What can I do to help myself get better?

- Unless told otherwise by staff, try to drink plenty and continue to eat as normally as possible whilst you have diarrhoea.
- Wash your hands with soap and water regularly, especially after using the toilet and before eating. This will help to prevent you ingesting (eating) more *C. diff* spores or bacteria.
- Keep your bedside table or locker top as clear of things as possible, to make it easy for staff to clean these surfaces regularly.

How can my visitors help?

- Your visitors are welcome but they should speak to the nurse in charge before going into your room.
- They should clean their hands with soap and water before entering and just before leaving your room. The nurses will also ask them to wear gloves and aprons whilst they are with you.
- Your visitors can help by encouraging you to drink plenty and to continue to eat properly, but they should check with staff first. If you need assistance with this, then they should wash their hands again immediately before they begin.
- Any clothes soiled with diarrhoea should be washed on a hot wash cycle, i.e. at least 60°C. For clothes that can not withstand such a temperature, wash at 40°C and tumble dry if possible.

Do I need to take any special precautions once I am home?

No, but symptoms of diarrhoea can sometimes reappear and if this happens, please contact your GP and explain that you have recently been in hospital and had *Clostridium difficile*.

Queries and concerns:

If you have queries or concerns, please speak to the nurses or doctors on the ward in the first instance.

The Infection Prevention and Control Nurses can also be contacted on Tel: Lister: 01438 314 333, ext 5383/5803

A leaflet called "A simple guide to *Clostridium difficile*" is available from the Department of Health website at: www.dh.gov.uk

Public Health England has produced a fact sheet about *C. difficile* at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/public-health-england>

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