

Clostridioides difficile

Patient information factsheet

This factsheet provides information about *Clostridioides difficile*, including what it is, its treatment, how we prevent it from spreading to others in hospital and what happens when you go home. We hope it will help to answer questions you may have. If you have any other questions, or wish to raise any concerns, please speak to a member of your healthcare team.

What is *Clostridioides difficile* (C. diff)?

Clostridioides difficile (also known as C. difficile or C. diff) is a type of bacteria (germ / bugs) that can live harmlessly in the gut, along with lots of other types of bacteria. Approximately 3% of healthy adults and 66% of children have C. difficile in their gut without it causing any harm. In some instances, C. difficile can cause infection.

When / why does C. difficile cause infection?

The normal balance of bacteria in the gut keeps C. diff under control. Sometimes, the normal balance can change (for example, when you take antibiotics). If this happens, the number of 'good bacteria' is reduced, so C. diff can multiply and produce toxins (harmful substances). The toxins can cause the gut to become inflamed and leads to symptoms of infection, such as diarrhoea.

What are the symptoms of C. diff?

The most common symptoms of a C. difficile are:

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

Occasionally, some people may experience severe inflammation of their gut (colitis). If you are in hospital and experience any of these symptoms, please let a member of staff know immediately.

Symptoms usually last for seven to 10 days. In some people, the symptoms may settle within a couple of days, whilst in others the symptoms may last longer than 10 days. Once you have recovered, if your symptoms start again, let a member of staff known immediately (or your GP if you are at home), as you may need more treatment.

How is C. difficile diagnosed?

It is diagnosed by testing your poo in a laboratory, where they check if C. difficile toxin is present.

How is C. difficile treated?

The treatment depends on your symptoms. You may need a course of antibiotics to treat the C. difficile infection. If you are prescribed antibiotics for treatment, it is important you complete the whole course, even if your diarrhoea settles. Following treatment, most people make a full recovery. Some people may have further episodes of diarrhoea and will need further treatment. A very small number of people may develop severe inflammation of their gut (colitis) and may need surgery.

If you have diarrhoea, it is important to drink plenty of fluids, such as water, squash and tea, so you don't become dehydrated (when your body loses more fluids than you take in).

How is C. difficile spread?

C. difficile can spread to other people because the bacteria are passed out of the body in a person's diarrhoea. Once outside the body, the bacteria take the form of spores (bacteria with a protective coating), which can survive for long periods on hands, surfaces (such as toilets, commodes and bed frames) and other objects/surfaces in the environment, 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.

Who is at risk of C. difficile infection?

You are at increased 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 in the last few months
- have a weakened immune system
- have had gut surgery
- have inflammatory bowel disease

What can I do to help protect myself whilst in hospital?

- always wash your hands with soap and water after using the toilet and before eating
- ask the nursing staff if you need help washing your hands (hand wipes are also available)

How do we stop the spread of C. difficile in hospital?

If you have diarrhoea whilst in hospital, you may be moved to a single room and cared for in isolation, to prevent C. difficile from spreading to others. If the single room does not have an ensuite toilet, or you are unable to mobilise to the toilet, you will be provided with your own labelled commode (a chair with a hidden toilet). In most cases, you will remain in a single room until your symptoms have settled for at least 48 hours and your bowel motions have returned to normal (for you).

Staff will wash their hands with soap and water after touching you or your surroundings. Staff may also wear gloves and aprons, depending on the care they are delivering for you. They will clean equipment and the environment thoroughly, to prevent the spread of C. difficile.

What is the advice for visitors?

Your family and friends can visit you in hospital, although people who are unwell themselves should not visit, for example people with diarrhoea and vomiting, new onset cough or rash that may be infectious to others. If your visitor has had a recent infection or illness or has a medical problem which makes them more vulnerable to infection, they should check with your doctor or nurse before visiting.

Visitors:

- wash your hands with soap and water on entering the patient's single room and again before leaving (in case you have any C. difficile germs on your hands, as alcohol hand sanitiser doesn't work against C. diff).
- gloves and aprons are not routinely needed but should be worn if you are helping the patient with their personal care. If used, please throw away after use into the bin provided with an orange bag and wash your hands afterwards with soap and water.
- when visiting, avoid eating and drinking in clinical areas, such as wards.

What happens when I go back home?

Continue to wash your hands after using the toilet and before eating, as you would normally.

If you have diarrhoea again after leaving hospital, contact your GP for advice. If you are re-admitted into hospital, please tell a member of staff that you had C. difficile infection. If you have diarrhoea at home and your clothing becomes soiled, wash your clothing on a hot wash cycle (60°C or above) or add a laundry disinfectant if a hot wash cannot be used, e.g. for knitted items.

Useful links: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/c-difficile/>

Further Information

We endeavour to provide an excellent service at all times, but should you have any concerns please, in the first instance, raise these with the Matron, Senior Nurse or Manager on duty. If they cannot resolve your concern, please contact our Patient Experience Team on 01932 723553 or email asp-tr.patient.advice@nhs.net. If you remain concerned, the team can also advise upon how to make a formal complaint.

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