

# Clostridium difficile

An information guide



# Clostridium difficile

Clostridium difficile (C.diff) is an organism (bacteria) that inhabits the bowel of a small percentage of healthy people without causing them any harm.

However, in some groups of the population, e.g. the elderly or those who have been taking antibiotics, the clostridium difficile bacteria can multiply and cause illness. When some people take antibiotics they can develop diarrhoea.

This happens because the antibiotics affect the bowel, destroying some of the normal commensals (protective bacteria) and allowing other pathogenic organisms (harmful bacteria), for example C. diff, to grow in their place. As the C. diff bacteria multiply, they produce poisons (toxins).

These toxins damage the lining of the bowel and can cause:

- Diarrhoea (watery stool)
- Abdominal cramps and tenderness
- Fever

These symptoms may range from mild to severe illness.

## How is it diagnosed?

Clostridium difficile is diagnosed by sending a specimen of diarrhoea to the laboratory for testing.

## **How does it spread?**

Clostridium difficile is passed out in the faeces of people who are infected.

Clostridium difficile can survive for a long time in the surroundings, on any surface, in toilet areas, on clothing, sheets and furniture. People can accidentally pick it up by touching dirty (contaminated) surfaces and then touching their mouth or eating.

Healthcare workers, visitors and patients can spread the infection to themselves and others by not washing their hands.

Clostridium difficile is able to produce spores that are highly resistant to chemicals therefore hand washing with soap and water rather than with alcohol gel is recommended.

## **How can you prevent spread?**

It is important that you wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water, especially after you use the toilet and before you eat.

Health care staff prevent the spread of C. diff infection by ensuring that they:

- Wash their hands with liquid soap and warm water.
- Wear aprons and gloves appropriately when carrying out care and when handling bedpans and commodes.
- Clean equipment and the environment thoroughly.

If you are self-caring it is essential that your hands are washed and dried thoroughly after using the toilet.

## **The treatment consists of:**

- Stopping the antibiotic treatment (if possible) which sometimes stops the diarrhoea by itself
- Prescribing another antibiotic course to kill the bacteria in the bowel, especially if diarrhoea is severe or persistent.

## **What about my visitors**

Your visitors do not need to wear gloves and aprons unless they are involved in your care. Healthy people are not usually at risk of getting *Clostridium difficile* and can safely visit patients with *clostridium difficile*.

Your visitors should:

- Always wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water when they enter or leave the hospital ward areas
- Do not bring food into the hospital
- Do not eat at the bedside of the person you are visiting
- Do not sit or lie on the beds
- Do not visit other patients in the hospital at the same time
- Avoid using the patient's toilet.

**It is vitally important for your visitors to wash their hands with soap and water on entering and leaving the room.**

## **What happens when I go home?**

If you suffer from diarrhoea again after you have returned home, you should contact your GP.

The hospital staff will let your GP know that you have had a *Clostridium difficile* infection whilst you were in hospital.

Your information may be shared with the Community Infection Prevention Team, if you have any concerns regarding this please ask your nurse or doctor to contact a member of the Infection Prevention Team for advice.





**If English is not your first language and you need help, please contact the Interpretation and Translation Service**

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**Date of publication: April 2005**

**Date of review: October 2019**

**Date of next review: October 2021**

**Ref: PI\_DS\_125**

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