

What is *Clostridium difficile*?

Clostridium difficile (*C. difficile*) is a bacteria that some people may carry in their bowel. *C. difficile* is normally kept under control by good bacteria in the bowel.

Certain antibiotics may change the natural balance of bacteria in the bowel. This enables *C. difficile* to multiply and produce toxins that may cause illness, including diarrhoea, that can have a particularly unpleasant smell.

Other symptoms of *C. difficile* infection may include stomach cramps, fever, nausea, loss of appetite and passing blood.

How does *C. difficile* spread?

- *C. difficile* is passed out in the faeces (diarrhoea) of people who are carrying the bacteria. So if you have *C. difficile* diarrhoea, or if you carry *C. difficile*, the bug can spread to the surrounding area, including toilet, clothing, hands, equipment or furniture.
- *C. difficile* can survive for a long time in the environment. People can accidentally pick it up by touching surfaces with their hands and then touching their mouth or eating.
- People may spread the *C. difficile* bacteria by not washing and drying their hands thoroughly.

How serious is *C. difficile* infection?

- In many cases *C. difficile* infection may be mild and will only last a few days.
- In some cases the effects are more serious, lasting for several weeks, and it will be necessary to treat the infection.
- Symptoms of severe infection include more frequent episodes of diarrhoea (which may have blood present), fever, severe abdominal cramps, dehydration, feeling sick, loss of appetite and weight loss.

How will I know if I have *C. difficile*?

There is a range of tests carried out by the laboratory. These tests may show if you are potentially carrying the *C. difficile* bacteria in your gut or if you have a *C. difficile* infection. The results of these tests, together with your clinical symptoms, will determine if you need an antibiotic. This will be decided by your doctor.

What will happen to me if I get *C. difficile* in hospital or in a care home?

- Patients/clients with *C. difficile* are usually nursed in a single room to help prevent the spread of infection to others.

- Sometimes patients are nursed in a bay with others who have a similar infection.
- Each patient/client with *C. difficile* must have their own toilet or commode.
- Healthcare staff will wear gloves and aprons whilst providing care and will wash their hands carefully before leaving your room.
- Nightwear and bed linen should be changed daily when *C. difficile* infection is present or when soiled.
- Rooms must be cleaned at least daily, with a chlorine-based cleaning product.

Thorough hand washing with soap and water is very important (especially after using the toilet). Proper drying, using a disposable paper towel, is also important. Hand sanitisers are not effective against *C. difficile*.

What treatment will I need?

- You will only need treatment if you have symptoms of active *C. difficile* infection ie diarrhoea. No treatment is needed if the *C. difficile* bacteria are living harmlessly in your gut and you do not have diarrhoea. If certain antibiotics have caused the diarrhoea, they may be either stopped or changed to an alternative antibiotic.
- If you have active *C. difficile* infection, then a specific antibiotic will be prescribed to help clear up the infection.

Can I have visitors?

Yes. They will be asked to wash their hands with soap and water before and after visiting you (see Advice for visitors).

Advice for visitors

If you are visiting a patient or client with *C. difficile* you should:

- wash your hands with soap and water before and after visiting;
- only visit your own relative;
- only bring in food if agreed in advance with the ward sister or charge nurse;
- avoid sitting on beds or visiting other patients/clients/relatives at the same time;
- avoid using patient's/client's toilets;
- follow the infection control requirements for the ward or facility you are visiting;
- ask staff for a copy of the *Laundry advice* leaflet.

If you require further advice or information, please contact the hospital's Infection Prevention and Control Team or a member of the ward/care home staff.

Infection prevention and control is everyone's responsibility.

Healthcare workers, patients and visitors all have an important role to play in preventing the spread of healthcare associated infections.

Clostridium difficile (*C. difficile*)

Information leaflet for patients and visitors