

Information for patients

A Guide to *Clostridioides difficile*



Infection Prevention and Control

What is Clostridioides difficile? (sometimes known as C.diff)

The gut of healthy people contains many types of bacteria (germs) that usually cause no harm. C.diff is a bacteria that may be present in small numbers in the gut. Sometimes as a result of taking antibiotics the balance of natural bacteria is disrupted while C. diff survives and multiplies. This can cause an infection which produces foul-smelling diarrhoea.

How does C. diff spread?

C.diff forms spores which can survive in the environment for a long time. A person who has diarrhoea caused by C. diff sheds large numbers of spores in their faeces (poo). These spores can contaminate toilets, equipment or get onto someone's hands and then be passed on to other people. C. diff can be picked up on other people's hands and through hand to mouth contact, transferring it to the gut. Usually, you will be nursed in a side room with infection control precautions in place until you have had no symptoms for at least 48 hours to prevent the spread of spores.

What are the signs and symptoms?

An increase of C. diff bacteria produces a toxin that irritates the gut lining. Diarrhoea is the most common symptom, however, it may also cause abdominal pain and swelling, fever, loss of appetite and sickness and in severe cases a type of colitis (inflammation of the colon) called pseudo-membranous colitis.

Who is at risk of getting C. diff infection?

- anyone taking certain types of antibiotics
- people in hospital, especially those over the age of 65
- people with inflammatory bowel disease
- people who have had surgery of the stomach and/or bowel
- people being treated for cancer, taking medication, or with illnesses that decrease the effectiveness of their immune (defence) system

Can C. diff be treated?

If the symptoms have settled, then no treatment is necessary. In mild cases, stopping antibiotics is all that is needed. However, if the symptoms are more severe, then there are antibiotics that can treat the infection. It is also important you drink plenty of fluids as diarrhoea can easily make you dehydrated. Patients with C. diff diarrhoea are monitored carefully for the development of complications. Complications such as severe swelling of the bowel are rare but can occur.

Will I have to stay in hospital longer because of the C. diff Infection?

You will not have to stay in hospital any longer than necessary. You will be allowed home as soon as you are fit to be discharged. If you are being discharged into a care home setting, you will be allowed to go once you have been symptom free for 48 hours. If returning to your own home you should continue to practice good hand hygiene practice.

If you have severe infection that requires a treatment that could not be administered at home, you may have to stay in hospital longer.

Can I have visitors whilst in hospital? Will C. diff harm family and friends?

It is not a risk to healthy people. If any of your visitors are concerned or feel they may be at risk, they should ask a nurse or doctor for advice. Visitors must wash their hands with soap and water before entering and leaving your room or ward if they are involved in the delivery of your care. If they are visiting another person in hospital as well as you, they must visit you last. Patients should not eat with relatives at the bedside or share food, as this will assist the transmission of the infection to others, as any food within the environment may be contaminated.

What can I do about it?

The most important method of preventing spread is good hand hygiene. You must wash your hands with liquid soap and water or detergent hand wipes after you have been to the toilet and before eating your meals. Alcohol hand gel is not effective against C.diff. C.diff spores can survive for long periods in the environment. Thorough cleaning will remove any spores from the contaminated environment.

Hand hygiene is the single most important thing you can do to prevent the spread of infection.

You should make regular and thorough hand washing as part of your daily routine, especially:

- Before eating or handling food.
- After using the toilet/commode
- After touching your wound, catheter
- After blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing
- After touching animals or animal waste
- After handling soiled clothing/rubbish
- After changing a nappy
- Before and after touching a sick or injured person
- Before, during and after a visit to a hospital ward or residential or nursing home

Do not forget to encourage children to wash their hands at these times too. **It is ok to remind healthcare staff to wash their hands.** It may feel like an awkward question to ask when someone is looking after you, but you are entitled to ask if you are concerned.

What happens after I go home?

There are no special precautions to take at home. Everyone should always wash their hands before handling food, before eating, after using the toilet and handling soiled linen and clothing.

Your GP should be informed of the C.diff infection on your discharge letter, however please remember to tell your GP that you have had C.diff infection in the past as this may change what type of antibiotic they prescribe for you in the future.

How to manage or wash your soiled clothing?

We do not wash patients' personal clothing in hospital. If your own clothing becomes soiled, your clothes will be sealed in a special pink dissolvable bag. This pink bag will then be placed into a white plastic 'patient's property' bag and stored in your locker, ready to be washed at home.

How to wash soiled clothing using a washing machine:

1. Take the pink bag out of the white 'patient's property' bag.
2. Place the pink bag into the washing machine. Do not open the pink bag as it has been specially designed to go straight into the washing machine. Do not add any other items of clothing into the washing machine.
3. You should always wash your hands thoroughly after handling soiled clothing, or the bag of soiled clothing.
4. Use a biological powder, liquid, or tablets if possible.
5. Use a pre-wash cycle before the main wash cycle.
6. Wash the items at the very least 60°C so that the pink bag dissolves and releases the clothing into the washing machine (washing at a lower temperature may not dissolve the bag, which may result in the parts of the bag sticking to the clothing).
7. When the washing cycle is complete, remove the washing from the washing machine and dry the clothing naturally or in a tumble dryer.

Infection prevention and control is everyone's responsibility. Healthcare workers, patients and visitors all have a vital role to play in preventing the spread of healthcare associated infections.

Notes:

If you require a special edition of this leaflet

This leaflet is available in large print. Arrangements can also be made on request for it to be explained in your preferred language. Please contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) email: rjah.pals.office@nhs.net

Feedback

Tell us what you think of our patient information leaflet. Please send your comments to the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) email: rjah.pals.office@nhs.net

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