

Clostridium difficile

Patient Information

What is Clostridium difficile?

Clostridium difficile are bacteria. In large numbers they can produce toxins that cause diarrhoea. It is one of the “normal bacteria” found in the gut of 3% of healthy adults.

If the balance of the bacteria in the gut is changed, Clostridium difficile can become more plentiful causing infection.

Who gets Clostridium difficile infection?

Most people who get Clostridium difficile infections are over 65, and have been unwell.

Usually something has happened to upset the balance in these people’s stomachs. Often this is because they are taking antibiotics, but other things that do this include:

- Having surgery involving the gut
- Having a poor immune system

How do you get Clostridium difficile?

When the bacteria get “out of balance”, they may cause symptoms that mean that the bacteria can be passed from one person to another, by the fecal oral route. Bacteria are passed out of the body in faeces. This is more likely when people have diarrhoea. Outside the body, the bacteria coat themselves in a hard covering, becoming a “spore”. These spores can live for a long time on things in the environment, like furniture and soft furnishings.

People can become infected when they touch these spores in the environment, or in faeces, and then put them in their mouths. **Only people that are already unwell or on antibiotics are likely to become infected.**

How to stop the spread of Clostridium difficile in hospitals, nursing and care homes:

Good hygiene and high cleaning standards are very important in stopping the spread of Clostridium difficile.

Patients with Clostridium difficile will often be looked after in a single room or a special ward. Staff will wear gloves and aprons and wash their hands with soap and water when they provide close care to patients with Clostridium difficile.

Patients with *Clostridium difficile* can still have visitors, but they should clean their hands thoroughly with soap and water before leaving the room.

At home:

Once symptoms have stopped patients will not have to stay in hospital due to *Clostridium difficile*. If patients are discharged from hospital whilst being treated for *Clostridium difficile* they must finish the treatment at home.

Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water (alcohol hand gel may not kill the *Clostridium difficile* spores) before:

- Preparing/eating food/helping someone else to eat
- After going to the toilet/ changing a nappy/helping someone else to go to the toilet
- After visiting hospitals and care homes
- Always finish prescribed antibiotic courses
- People who are ill should not go to work or school until they have been free of diarrhoea for at least 48 hours
- Wash dirty clothes and bedding in a machine on the highest setting
- Clean toilet bowls, flushes, taps and basins with detergent and hot water after use

What are the symptoms of *Clostridium difficile* infection?

The symptoms of *Clostridium difficile* vary from mild to severe diarrhoea. They may also include:

- Nausea
- Stomach pain
- Fever
- Loss of appetite

Sometimes an infection can lead to severe inflammation of the colon. In the very worst cases the colon can tear. This is rare but if it happens, may result in the need for surgery and can be fatal.

How is it treated?

A sample of faeces will be taken to see if the symptoms are due to *Clostridium difficile* toxins.

Depending on the results, your GP may advise stopping any antibiotics you are already taking. This may be enough to stop the symptoms. If patients have more severe symptoms, special antibiotics will be prescribed, usually for 10 days.

It may take a few days before these start to work and the symptoms get better. It is important to take the whole course even if the symptoms get better.

- Other medicines that stop diarrhoea are not recommended in the case of
- *Clostridium difficile* It is important to drink plenty of fluid

Most people make a full recovery. Sometimes the symptoms come back after the antibiotics have finished. If this happens, you may need another course of antibiotics.

Jointly written by Local NHS Organisations

Further information can be found at:

www.hpa.org.uk & www.dh.gov.uk & www.healthcareA2Z.org

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