

Clostridium difficile

What is Clostridium difficile?

Clostridium difficile is sometimes known as C.difficile or C.diff. It is a spore forming bacterium which is present as one of the 'normal' bacteria in the gut of some adults and children.

C.difficile doesn't cause any problems in healthy people.

How do you catch it?

C.difficile can cause illness when certain antibiotics, used to treat other health conditions, disturb the balance of 'normal' bacteria in the gut.

When this happens, C.difficile bacteria can multiply and cause symptoms such as diarrhoea and fever.

It is also possible for the infection to spread from person to person as those suffering from C.difficile associated diarrhoea shed spores in their faeces.

The spores are able to survive for a long time and can contaminate the surrounding environment, such as toilets, bedclothes, skin and clothing. The spores can be picked up by hand to mouth contact and remain in the gut. Some people may then go on to develop C.difficile diarrhoea.

What are the symptoms of C.difficile?

The symptoms of C.difficile can include:

- Mild to severe diarrhoea
- Fever
- Loss of appetite
- Sickness
- Abdominal pain or tenderness

Patient Information

Infection Control Department

Whipps Cross Road, Leytonstone, London, E11 1NR www.whippsx.nhs.uk

Who does it affect? Are some people more at risk?

Those more at risk include:

- The elderly – more than 80 per cent of cases are reported in the over 65 year age group.
- Patients who have a weakened immune system, for example following chemotherapy.
- Patients who have had repeated enemas and/or gut surgery.
- Those being treated with antibiotics, which may disturb the balance of normal bacteria in the gut.

How is it diagnosed?

It is difficult to diagnose on the basis of symptoms alone, therefore a sample of the infected person's faeces is sent to the laboratory to test for the presence of C.difficile toxins.

How can it be treated?

C.difficile is treated with specific antibiotics and most patients make a full recovery.

There is a risk that some patients may experience further episodes of C.difficile, this is known as a relapse and happens in approximately 20 to 30 per cent of patients.

However, elderly patients with other medical conditions are at increased risk of more severe illness.

How can you help prevent the spread of C.difficile?

If you have been diagnosed with C.difficile:

- You will be moved into an isolation area to prevent you spreading the infection to others.
- Make sure you wash your hands with soap and water, especially after using the toilet and before eating.

If you are visiting someone in hospital who has C.difficile:

- Make sure you wash your hands with soap and water before and following any contact with the infected person.
- Do not eat or drink in the same room as the infected person.
- If you have recently taken antibiotics or you fall into one of the risk groups, speak to a member of staff for further advice.

Hands must be cleaned with soap and water, the alcohol hand gel does not work against C.difficile.

How can we prevent the spread of C.difficile?

The hospital has a detailed treatment plan for patients with C.difficile, this includes:

- Isolation of patients into a side room on the ward or to another ward. This helps reduce the risk of patients with diarrhoea unintentionally spreading the infection.
- Disinfecting and cleaning rooms and equipment with chlorine – this sometimes means our floors may not look as shiny as the chlorine can affect the shine.
- Staff following strict hand washing with soap and water when looking after infected patients.
- Following strict antibiotic prescribing policy and practices.

Can you go home with C.difficile?

Patients with C.difficile can go home when they feel well enough and the doctors are satisfied with their recovery, this would usually be when the diarrhoea has stopped or is improving.

It is important to continue good hand washing hygiene using soap and water following use of the toilet and before eating meals.

Questions or concerns

If you have any further questions or concerns about C.difficile please contact our Infection Control Nurses or ask a nurse to arrange for them to come and speak to you.

Contact

Infection Control Nurses, Monday to Friday from 8.30am to 5pm:

- Telephone: 020 8535 6846
- Email: infection.control@whippsx.nhs.uk.

If you need this leaflet in another format, please contact the Infection Control Nurses as shown above.

Further information is available from:

NHS Direct:

- Telephone: 0845 4647
- Website: www.nhsdirect.co.uk

Health Protection Agency:

Provides the figures and rates of C.difficile at all NHS hospitals.

- Website: www.hpa.org.uk