

## Clostridium difficile - Information for Patients

### What Is Clostridium difficile?

Clostridium difficile (commonly called C. difficile or C. diff) is a bacterium (germ) that lives in the bowel. It rarely causes problems as it is kept under control by the normal 'good' bacteria in the bowel. Unfortunately, some antibiotics can reduce the amount of good bacteria and C. difficile can multiply and produce toxins which can cause diarrhoea. C. difficile is infectious and can be spread from patient to patient unless strict hygiene measures are followed.

### What are the symptoms of C. difficile?

The main symptom is diarrhoea and can vary in severity, the diarrhoea can have a particularly unpleasant smell and may contain mucous or blood. Other symptoms may include stomach cramps, fever, nausea and loss of appetite. Severe inflammation of the bowel is possible, but this is rare. For most people symptoms will begin to settle within a few days, for others it may be longer.

### Who is most at risk of getting C. difficile?

People are more at risk of developing C. difficile infection are:

- The elderly (over 65 age group)
- Those who are, or have recently finished taking antibiotics or any other medication that may alter the normal bacteria in the gut
- Those who have had gastrointestinal surgery
- Those with reduced immunity

## **How is C. difficile diagnosed?**

It is difficult to diagnose C. difficile infection by symptoms only. Therefore, a sample of diarrhoea is taken and sent to a laboratory for testing. You can normally expect the result to be available within 48 hours.

## **How is C. difficile Treated?**

Once the diagnosis is made your doctor will review your medication and make any necessary changes. Fortunately, most people only develop mild illness and stopping antibiotics (if possible) can result in improvement. Sometimes it is necessary to give specific antibiotics to treat the C. difficile infection.

## **How is C. difficile Spread?**

C. difficile produces spores that can be spread in the environment when a person has diarrhoea. These spores can be spread to patients in many ways, such as from the hands of healthcare workers, or by patients and visitors who have touched a contaminated surface such as medical equipment or toilets. C. difficile infection occurs when spores enter the body through the mouth and are swallowed.

## **What can be done to reduce the risk of Clostridium difficile spreading?**

It is very important to maintain good personal hygiene. Alcohol hand gels are not effective against C. difficile spores. It is important that spores are removed from the hands by thoroughly washing with soap and water. You must wash your hands after using the toilet and before eating or handling food; this will help reduce germs spreading. Don't forget to ask for help with this if you need it.

## **How will C. difficile affect my stay in hospital?**

If C. difficile infection is confirmed, then you may be moved to a single room. You will also be given your own toilet or commode to use. Staff will wear gloves and an apron when providing care for you as well as washing their hands with soap and water before and after delivering care. This will help stop the spread of C. difficile to other patients.

Once you have stopped having diarrhoea and have had formed stools for 48 -72 hours, you are not considered infectious although you will be expected to finish your treatment for the C. difficile infection. It is important to inform staff immediately if you have any further episodes of diarrhoea.

## **What precautions do visitors have to take?**

Visitors do not usually need to wear gloves and aprons unless they are helping with personal care, the staff on the ward will be able to advise. All staff, patients and visitors should be thorough in their hand washing with soap and water every time they deliver treatment or visit.

## **Can people with C. difficile still send their washing home?**

Used clothing should be transported from hospital to home in a sealed plastic bag and the contents of the bag should be emptied directly into the washing machine. Clothing should be washed separately at the highest temperature that the care label recommends whilst diarrhoea persists. Hand must be washed thoroughly with soap and water after handling the clothing.

## **Can I go home with C. difficile?**

You will be allowed to go home when you are medically fit. Your medical team will let you know if you need to continue treatment at home. If your diarrhoea continues, will you need to wash hands with soap and water especially after using the toilet and before and after eating food.

If your symptoms increase or you become unwell inform your GP or hospital immediately.

## **Can C. difficile come back?**

There is a possibility that the infection and symptoms may re-occur. You should contact your GP or hospital if you develop symptoms after discharge from hospital.

## **Where can I find more information?**

If you would like any further information, please speak to the member of staff looking after you. You can also discuss your concerns with a Matron or a member of the Infection Prevention & Control Team 0151 702 4014.

The Public Health England website and The NHS Website are other sources of information: <http://www.hpa.org.uk>  
[Clostridium difficile \(C. diff\) - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](http://www.nhs.uk)

**This leaflet can be made available in different formats on request. If you would like to make any suggestions or comments about the content of this leaflet, then please contact the Patient Experience Team on 0151 702 4353 or by email at [pals@lwh.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@lwh.nhs.uk)**

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