

Clostridium difficile Infection

Patient Information

Infection prevention and Control Department

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What is Clostridium difficile infection?

Clostridium difficile (often known as C.diff) is an organism (bacteria) that resides in the bowel of a small percentage of healthy people without causing them any harm. In some cases, e.g. people who have been taking antibiotics, C.diff bacteria can multiply and cause illness and diarrhoea. This happens because the antibiotics affect the bowel, destroying some of the normal protective bacteria and allow the harmful bacteria to grow. If the C.diff bacteria grow to a high level, they can begin to produce toxins that can cause inflammation to the lining of the bowel and cause symptoms such as:

- Diarrhoea (loose, watery offensive stool)
- Abdominal cramps and tenderness
- Fever

If left untreated, C.diff disease can worsen and sometimes become very severe, so it is important for this disease to be identified quickly so treatment can commence.

Who is at risk of C.diff?

There are some patients who are more at risk of developing C.diff, these are:

- Patients over 65 age group.
- Patients, who have reduced ability to fight infection.
- Patients who have received antibiotics for an infection which also may have killed off normal bowel bacteria.

How is C.diff diagnosed?

C.diff is diagnosed by sending a specimen of diarrhoea to the laboratory for testing. The results can tell us if C.diff is present in the bowel and if there is any toxin being produced. C.diff can be present but not necessarily be producing the toxin; however if a patient is experiencing symptoms of diarrhoea, treatment is usually commenced to prevent progression of the disease.

How is C.diff spread?

C.diff is passed out in the faeces of people who are infected in the form of spores. The spores can survive for a long time in the surroundings, on surfaces, in toilet areas, on clothing, sheets and furniture. People can accidentally pick up the spores by touching dirty (contaminated) surfaces and then touching their mouth or eating. Healthcare workers, visitors and patients can spread the infection to others by not washing their hands. Alcohol gel is ineffective against the spores, so hands must be washed with soap and water.

How can you prevent spread?

It is important that you wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water, especially after you use the toilet and before you eat. Healthcare staff can prevent the spread of C.diff infection by ensuring that they:

- Wear aprons and gloves appropriately when carrying out care and when handling bedpans and commodes.
- Wash their hands with soap and water.
- Thoroughly clean the environment and equipment.

If you are self-caring, it is essential that your hands are washed and dried thoroughly after using the toilet and before eating or drinking. If you need help to do this, please ask a member of staff.

How is C.diff treated?

If you are in hospital, you will be asked to move either to a single side room or a designated isolation ward. Your medication will be reviewed and specific antibiotics given to treat the C.diff infection. The medical and nursing team will check to make sure you are taking in adequate fluids and monitor your symptoms. It is important that you report any increase of your symptoms such as worsening diarrhoea or abdominal pain.

If you are at home, your GP will be contacted with your results by the microbiologist and your GP will arrange appropriate antibiotic treatment for you if this is required.

Will this affect any of my treatment?

No. Investigations and your treatment will continue, with the staff taking the correct infection control precautions. Occasionally, non-urgent investigations may be delayed if you have very uncontrolled and severe diarrhoea.

Can I have visitors?

Yes. Visitors may still visit, but the hospital advice is that any elderly, or people susceptible to infection, or with an active infection that is being treated with antibiotics, may be at risk of picking up C.diff. Healthy people have very little risk; however, your visitors need to wash their hands with soap and water on entering and leaving the ward or your home. Visitors are not required to wear gloves and aprons unless they are helping with your personal care or treatment whilst you are in hospital.

Can my washing be sent home?

Yes. The ward has special leaflets and bags in which to send you're washing home. Your relatives/carers can speak to staff regarding this.

Can I still go home?

Yes; as long as you are medically stable and you and your family are happy for you to go home. However, if you are still having frequent diarrhoea, you may need to stay in hospital until it settles. If you suffer from increasing diarrhoea again after you have returned home,

you should contact your GP. The hospital staff will let your GP know that you have had Clostridium difficile infection whilst you were in hospital.

How can I stop the spread of C-diff once I am home?

- Stay at home until at least 48 hours after your symptoms have cleared up.
- Washing your hands with soap and water before eating or preparing food and after using the toilet is very important. Use liquid soap rather than a bar of soap, and don't use flannels or nail brushes
- Clean contaminated surfaces – such as the toilet, flush handle, light switches and door handles – with a bleach-based cleaner after each use.
- Don't share towels and flannels.
- Wash contaminated clothes and sheets separately from other washing at the highest possible temperature for the fabric.

Looking after yourself at home

It is important that you finish the entire course of any antibiotics you're prescribed, even if you're feeling better. Don't take anti-diarrheal medication, as this can stop the infection being cleared from your body. You can take paracetamol for tummy pain or a fever.

Drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration and eat plain foods, such as soup, rice, pasta and bread if you feel hungry.

Contact your GP or out of hours GP service if your symptoms do not improve or get worse (e.g fever, acute pain or abdominal swelling); make them aware of your Clostridium difficile (C.diff) diagnosis.

Who can I contact for further information?

If you have any questions or would like further information about C.diff please do not hesitate to contact a member of staff whilst in hospital, or your general practitioner once discharged home.

Please use this space to write notes/reminders.

Comments, Compliments or Complaints

The Patient Relations/Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) Department provides confidential on the spot advice, information and support to patients, relatives, friends and carers.

Contact Us

Tel: 01942 822376 (Monday to Friday 9am to 4pm)

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Ask 3 Questions

Become more involved in decisions about your healthcare. You may be asked to make choices about your treatment. To begin with, try to make sure you get the answers to three key questions:

1. What are my options?
2. What are the pros and cons of each option for me?
3. How do I get support to help me make a decision that is right for me?



How We Use Your Information

For details on how we collect, use and store the information we hold about you, please take a look at our “how we use your information” leaflet which can be found on the Trust website:

www.wwl.nhs.uk/patient_information/Leaflets/default.aspx

This leaflet is also available in audio, large print, braille and other languages upon request. For more information please ask in department/ward.

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