

Information for patients

Clostridium Difficile



Infection Control

Background

You may have heard about *Clostridium difficile* in the news. It is also known as *C. difficile* or *C-diff*. Its name comes from the fact that when it was first discovered it was difficult to grow in the laboratory. *C. difficile* is a type of bacteria that is anaerobic, which means that it does not grow in the presence of oxygen. The effects of *C. difficile* infection are caused by the production of two toxins, toxin A and toxin B. *C. difficile* normally lives, in small numbers, in the intestines of up to 3% of adults and over 50% of infants without causing any harm. It is only when the bacteria starts to produce toxins that an illness is triggered. *C. difficile* can cause symptoms ranging from mild diarrhoea to a severe, life-threatening illness.

How does it spread?

Clostridium difficile can form spores which can survive in the environment for a long time. A person who has diarrhoea caused by *C. difficile* sheds large numbers of spores in their faeces. These spores can contaminate toilets, equipment or get onto someone else's hands and then be passed to other people.

What are the symptoms?

C. difficile infection has a range of effects from no symptoms at all to diarrhoea which can be mild or severe. In very rare cases it causes a severe swelling of the bowel, called pseudomembranous colitis, which can be life-threatening and may require an operation. *C. difficile* infection may also cause fever, loss of appetite, nausea and stomach pain.

Who is at risk?

Everyone's bowels contain large numbers of different types of bacteria. Certain antibiotics alter the normal balance of bacteria increasing the risk of developing *C. difficile* diarrhoea. This increased risk can last for several weeks after the antibiotics have been finished. The elderly are most likely to get *C. difficile* diarrhoea. People with severe underlying illnesses and problems with their immune system are also at increased risk. Children under the age of two years old are not usually affected.

How is it diagnosed?

C. difficile is suspected in all patients who develop diarrhoea in hospital or who are taking/ have recently taken antibiotics. A sample of faeces is sent to the laboratory and tested for presence of toxins.

What treatments are available?

If the symptoms have already settled then no treatment is necessary. In mild cases, simply stopping antibiotics is all that is needed. If this is not possible or the symptoms are more severe, then there are specific medications that can be used. The two most common treatments used are called metronidazole or vancomycin. It is also important that the patient receives plenty of fluids. Patients with *C. difficile* diarrhoea are monitored carefully for the development of complications. Complications such as severe swelling of the bowel are very rare but can occur. In severe cases, the patient may have to be transferred to another hospital for specialist care.

What will happen to me if I am diagnosed with C Diff?

- You will be asked to move to a single room or designated ward. If you are placed in a sideroom we ask you not to have contact with other patients until advised to by ward staff. This will help prevent spread the infection to other patients

- Staff will wear gloves if they are performing any personal care for you, as well as strict hand washing. This will help prevent the spread of infection to other vulnerable patients
- You must make sure you wash your hands well with soap and water after using the toilet and before meals
- The bedside alcohol gel is not effective against C diff

Will any of my treatment be delayed?

No, investigations and treatment will continue with staff taking the correct precautions, however some non urgent investigations may be delayed if you are experiencing severe diarrhoea.

Are there any complications?

Unfortunately, even with appropriate medical care, C. difficile infection can be fatal. Mortality rates are higher in patients who are elderly, have severe disease and significant underlying illnesses.

Are relatives and other visitors at risk?

Healthy visitors have very little risk of getting C.difficile. Visitors who are unwell, have been on antibiotics or have underlying conditions should check with staff before visiting. If you are visiting a patient with C. difficile then everyone should wash their hands with soap and water when leaving the ward as the alcohol gel does not work with this condition. Please do not sit on the bed. If unsure, ask the ward staff for advice

What happens after discharge?

Patients who have had C. difficile diarrhoea can be discharged or transferred back to their own home or a nursing/residential home when the diarrhoea has settled. Once symptoms have stopped, there is no risk to other people provided that normal hygiene measures, such as washing hands with soap and water after using the toilet, are followed. Relapses are common and can occur in up to 25% of patients. If diarrhoea recurs after discharge then you should contact your GP.

What do hospital staff do to reduce risk?

Patients with C. difficile diarrhoea are moved into single rooms or into bays with other patients that are affected. Staff wear gloves and aprons if they perform any personal care for infected patients and wash their hands before and after doing so. The environment is cleaned rigorously and specific toilets or commodes may be allocated to affected patients. Doctors and pharmacists make sure that antibiotics are only prescribed when they are needed and that the antibiotics chosen have as little effect on the bowel as possible.

What can you do?

If you have C. difficile diarrhoea, it is most important to wash your hands with soap and water after using the toilet and before meals.

Further information

Please contact the Infection Control Nurse on **01691 404000** bleep 102. The Department of Health has published 'A simple guide to C difficile' available at www.dh.gov.uk

The Health Protection Agency:www.hpa.org.uk/webw/HPAweb&Page&HPAwebAutoListName/Page/1179744911900?p=1179744911900

NHS Direct. Tel: **0845 4647** www.nhsdirect.uk

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

Date of publication: June 2021
Date of review: June 2023
Author: Infection Prevention and Control Team
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