

Clostridium difficile

What is *Clostridium difficile*?

Clostridium difficile (also known as “*C. difficile*” or “*C. diff*”) is a bacterium that can be found in people’s intestines (their “digestive tract” or “gut”). However, it does not cause disease by its presence alone; it can be found in healthy people, about 3% of adults and two-thirds of babies with no symptoms. It causes disease when the normal bacteria in the gut, with which *C. difficile* competes, are disadvantaged, usually by someone taking antibiotics, allowing the *C. difficile* to grow to unusually high levels. This allows the toxin they produce to reach levels where it attacks the intestine and causes symptoms of disease.

What are the symptoms of *C. difficile* infection (CDI)?

C. difficile causes diarrhoea (mild to severe) and, unusually, life-threatening inflammation of the intestines. Other symptoms can include fever, loss of appetite, nausea and abdominal pain or tenderness.

How do you catch it?

Another person may acquire *C. difficile* by ingesting the bacteria through contact with the contaminated environment or patient. In most healthy people the *C. difficile* will not be able to multiply in the gut and they will not develop disease. In some more vulnerable people, particularly those whose normal gut bacteria have been disrupted by antibiotic treatment, the *C. difficile* may be able to multiply in the gut and go on to cause disease.

How is it treated?

In most patients the disease can be treated with antibiotics.

How is *C. difficile* infection diagnosed?

Initial diagnosis can be on the symptoms and patient history (e.g. having taken antibiotics). Such a preliminary diagnosis can initiate increased levels of infection prevention and control precautions, such as isolation of a patient in a single room, to prevent spread. This can be followed-up with looking for *C. difficile* toxins in the faeces, but this test will take a day to do.

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

Those who have taken antibiotics, particularly the elderly; over 80% of cases are reported in the over 65s. Immuno-compromised patients are also at risk (these are patients with a reduced immune response who are more vulnerable to infection). Children under the age of two years are not usually affected.

How can hospitals prevent the spread of *C. difficile*?

As antibiotics sensitise patients to *C. difficile* infection, ensuring they are used only when really necessary is a very effective control measure.

Identifying patients in the early stages of this disease and introducing enhanced infection prevention and control measures, such as placing them in a single room, helps limit spread. Staff should wear disposable gloves and aprons when caring for infected patients, and wash their hands after contact with a patient who has the infection. *C. difficile* contamination should

be removed from the environment by daily thorough cleaning using a bleach containing cleaning agent.

In an outbreak situation, the Infection Prevention and Control Team may introduce additional special measures for staff, patients and visitors.

If I have *C. difficile* what should I do to prevent the spread to others?

Because *C. difficile* is able to produce a form of cell that is highly resistant to chemicals (spores), hand washing using soap and water rather than an alcohol hand rub is recommended after contact with a patient with *C. difficile*. Soap and water will remove the microorganisms (including spores) from the hands, whilst alcohol hand rubs will not destroy the spores.

In order to reduce the chance of spreading the infection to others it is advisable to wash hands with soap and water, especially after using the toilet and before eating. You should also encourage your visitors to wash their hands when they leave.

I have heard that some patients are at increased risk for *C. difficile* disease. Is that true?

It is true. The risk for disease increases in patients with the following:

- Antibiotic exposure.
- Gastrointestinal surgery/manipulation.
- Long length of stay in healthcare settings.
- A serious underlying illness.
- Immuno-compromising conditions.
- Advanced age.

Does somebody who has had a *C. difficile* infection pose a risk to others after they have been discharged?

There should be no restriction on the discharge or transfer of patients who have had *C. difficile* diarrhoea and have recovered. Once someone has recovered clinically, they are not a risk to others even if they continue to carry the organism in their intestines provided that they observe normal personal hygiene precautions such as hand washing after using the toilet. Having had *C. difficile* infection is not a restriction to a patient returning to a care home / nursing home / community hospital.

The above information was sourced from a ***C. difficile* fact sheet provided by Public Health England (formally the Health Protection Agency) see below for details of PHE website.**

Preventing and treating *C. difficile* infection within the Trust?

East Sussex Healthcare NHS Trust follows Department of Health guidelines for the prevention and treatment of *C. difficile* infection (CDI) including:

Isolation

Contamination of the environment from patients with symptoms can lead to cross-infection within the hospital. Therefore patients with CDI will be nursed in isolation (either a single room or a dedicated area) until their infection is fully resolved and the risk of relapse is considered minimal.

All staff entering a single room / isolation area should use disposable gloves and aprons for all contact with patients and their environment, and wash their own hands with soap and water before and after contact.

Patients visitors do not routinely need to wear protective clothing unless involved in personal patient care. Visitors should not sit on patients beds or move between patients without first washing their hands.

Visitors should wash their hands with soap and water after visiting patients with CDI or a designated area.

Treatment

Treatment (usually with specific antibiotics) will be reviewed and monitored by the clinical team responsible for patients care and a Consultant Microbiologist who specialises in the treatment of infections.

Cleaning

Cleaning agents which destroy *C. difficile* spores (responsible for cross infection) are used within the hospitals to reduce potential environmental contamination. Specific care is also taken with the cleaning of patient equipment, particularly commodes, toilets and bathroom areas.

Further information

If you have any queries please discuss with the nursing or medical staff or alternatively you may contact the Infection Prevention and Control Team:

Conquest Hospital

The Ridge
St. Leonards-on-Sea
East Sussex, TN37 7RD
Tel: (01424) 755255 ext 8610

Eastbourne District General Hospital

Kings Drive
Eastbourne
East Sussex, BN21 2UD
Tel: (01323) 417400 ext 4136

- More detailed information on *C. difficile* is available from Public Health England via the UK Government website:
www.gov.uk/government/organisations/public-health-england

Important information

The information in this leaflet is for guidance purposes only and is not provided to replace professional clinical advice from a qualified practitioner.

Your comments

We are always interested to hear your views about our leaflets. If you have any comments, please contact the Patient Experience Team – Tel: (01323) 417400 Ext: 5860 or by email at: esh-tr.patientexperience@nhs.net

Hand hygiene

The Trust is committed to maintaining a clean, safe environment. Hand hygiene is very important in controlling infection. Alcohol gel is widely available at the patient bedside for staff use and at the entrance of each clinical area for visitors to clean their hands before and after entering.

Hand washing with soap and water is very important in controlling the spread of *C. difficile* infection. Visitors should wash their hands after visiting patients with *C. difficile* infection or a designated area.

Other formats

If you require any of the Trust leaflets in alternative formats, such as large print or alternative languages, please contact the Equality and Human Rights Department.

Tel: 01424 755255 Ext: 2620

After reading this information are there any questions you would like to ask? Please list below and ask your nurse or doctor.

Reference

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