

Clostridioides difficile (C. diff) – information for patients and carers

Clostridioides difficile infection

You have been given this leaflet as you, or someone you care for, has tested positive for Clostridioides difficile. Clostridioides difficile (commonly known as C. diff) is a germ that is found in the gut of a small number of healthy people.

It is usually harmless but can multiply and cause an infection if other 'good' germs in the gut are harmed by medical treatments such as antibiotics or chemotherapy. These good germs can help protect against C. diff. The use of antibiotics is the most common cause of a C. diff infection.

How do people get a C. diff infection?

C. diff can survive outside the body on different surfaces for a long time. It can be found in many places, both inside and outside our homes and hospitals. We can swallow C. diff germs without realising it after touching surfaces that have C. diff on them. Usually this doesn't make you sick, but sometimes it can.

The most common way germs like C. diff are spread is by people's hands. Washing your hands is the single most important thing you can do to help to reduce the spread of infections. Washing your hands properly can help protect you, your family, and others.

You should make regular hand washing part of your daily routine, especially before eating or handling food, after using the toilet, when your hands become dirty and when entering or leaving a hospital.

What are the symptoms of a C. diff infection?

C. diff can damage the lining of the gut wall, causing symptoms including diarrhoea, loss of appetite, feeling sick, tummy pain and fever (high temperature). Sometimes C. diff can cause more serious complications which need to be treated in hospital.

You are more likely to get a C. diff infection if you:

- are taking, or have recently taken, antibiotics;
- are in hospital or a care home, particularly if you have been in hospital a long time;
- are over 65;
- are being treated for cancer;
- are taking medication to reduce the acid in your stomach;
- have an inflammatory gut condition;
- have had stomach or gut surgery; or
- have an illness or are taking medicines that lower your immunity (the way your body fights infections).

You can also get a C. diff infection without any of these risk factors.

People can come into contact with C. diff germs and not get sick, but still spread them to others.

How does C. diff spread?

When someone has C. diff, these germs are found in their poo. If their poo is very runny (diarrhoea), it is more likely to spread to other people. Germs can survive on skin (for example, your hands), fabrics, toilets, commodes, bed frames and other surfaces.

Without thorough cleaning, the germs can survive for a very long time, spread, and infect other people.

If you have diarrhoea, you, and anyone you come into direct contact with or share space with while you are poorly, must always wash their hands with soap and water and dry them thoroughly. Alcohol hand gel is **not** effective against C. diff.

What is the treatment for C. diff infection?

Treatment usually includes taking specific antibiotics that can kill C. diff.

You must finish the course of antibiotics, even if your symptoms are getting better or have stopped. This is to reduce the risk of you having another C. diff infection. It is important that you stay hydrated, so remember to drink plenty of water or non-alcoholic drinks.

Other medicines you take may be stopped to increase the chance of successful treatment and reduce the risk of you getting a C. diff infection again.

How will my care change in hospital?

If you are in hospital when you are diagnosed with a C. diff infection, you may be looked after in a single room to reduce the chance of the infection spreading to other patients.

You may have separate facilities, with either an en-suite toilet or a commode. Make sure you always wash your hands with soap and water and dry them thoroughly after using the toilet and before eating.

Staff will wash their hands and wear a clean plastic apron and gloves when caring for you and should remove these and wash their hands after your care. This is to prevent the infection spreading to others. Your family will be able to speak to the person in charge of your ward to discuss when and how they can visit you.

What should I do when I go home from hospital, or if I am at home when I get a C. diff infection?

At home, you and others in your household should always wash your hands, with soap and water, after going to the toilet and before preparing and eating food. Your clothing, bed linen, towels and other fabrics should be washed at the highest recommended temperatures.

During your treatment (and later if the diarrhoea continues or returns), clean and disinfect the toilet, flush handle and taps after using the toilet. Use a bleach-based solution to do this but take care as some cleaning products can be harmful.

If surfaces have poo on them, first remove the poo and make the surface visibly clean, and then disinfect again.

Do not share personal items such as towels, facecloths, and toothbrushes with others.

Can I have a C. diff infection more than once?

Up to 3 in 10 people have a C. diff infection more than once. If your symptoms return in your home, or in hospital, you should ask your healthcare professional for advice and appropriate treatment.

Taking antibiotics could put you at risk of another C. diff infection. To reduce your chance of getting C. diff again, it is important that your healthcare professional knows that you have had a previous C. diff infection. You may be offered a C. diff patient information card. Please show this card or tell your healthcare professional that you have had a previous C. diff infection, before receiving any further treatment for other infections (including C. diff).