

# Clostridium difficile (*C. difficile*)

## Information for patients and families

Read this resource to learn about:

- What is *C. difficile*
- How people get infected with *C. difficile*
- Treatment and medicine
- How to stop *C. difficile* from spreading



## **What is *C. difficile*?**

*C. difficile* is a bacterium (germ) that creates a toxin (poison) that can cause swelling in the intestines.

If you get sick with *C. difficile*, the most common symptoms are:

- diarrhea
- fever
- stomach pain

## **Who is most likely to get *C. difficile*?**

Some people have a higher chance of getting infected by *C. difficile*.

This includes any adult who:

- must be in the hospital for long periods
- are older
- use certain antibiotics
- have other serious illnesses, such as cancer

Children rarely get *C. difficile* infections. But, children who must spend a lot of time in the hospital because of serious illnesses are at risk.

## **How did I get *C. difficile*?**

*C. difficile* can be found in a person's intestines (gut) without causing them to get sick. Healthy people are less likely to get sick from *C. difficile*.

Taking certain antibiotics (medicine that fights infection) or having chemotherapy can make it easier for *C. difficile* to grow and cause infection.

*C. difficile* can live on objects for up to 30 days or more. It can be picked up by touching a person who has *C. difficile* or a surface contaminated with *C. difficile* and then touching your mouth. This is why hand washing is very important.

## **How does my health care team treat this?**

If we think you have a *C. difficile* infection, we will ask you to give a stool sample for testing.

Also, your doctor may order special medicine like antibiotics to treat your *C. difficile* infection.

## **Will I have this infection for the rest of my life?**

*C. difficile* can be treated successfully using special antibiotics.

When you are being treated for *C. difficile*, your symptoms (for example, diarrhea) will usually get better after a few days of taking your antibiotics. By the time you finish all the antibiotics and you do not have any more diarrhea, the *C. difficile* is usually resolved.

*C. difficile* diarrhea returns for 1 in 5 people after they get better. If you get sick with *C. difficile* again, you will be treated again with special antibiotics.

## **How do we stop *C. difficile* from spreading in hospitals?**

If we think you have *C. difficile* or if you have been tested and we are sure you have it, we may ask your healthcare team and visitors to follow these safety rules (contact precautions) while you are in the hospital:

- You may be moved to a single room.
- Everyone entering your room must clean their hands, and then wear a gown and gloves.
- You may only leave the room with permission from Infection Prevention and Control personnel.
- You must wash your hands regularly, especially before eating, and after using the washroom.
- All equipment (for example, a walker) must be wiped down with a disinfectant after use.

## **Why am I kept away from others if I have *C. difficile*?**

*C. difficile* can spread easily in the hospital. Keeping you in your own room and away from others lowers the chance of *C. difficile* spreading to other patients.

## **How long will I be in a separate room?**

The diarrhea caused by a *C. difficile* infection usually stops several days after treatment. Keeping you away from others is usually only necessary while you are having diarrhea and for 48 hours or 2 days after you stop having diarrhea and are back to normal.

## **Can I pass on *C. difficile* to my family or friends?**

Usually healthy people will not catch this infection. The best way for your family and friends to stay healthy is to wash their hands and follow the special precautions while they visit you in the hospital.

## **What do I need to do when I get home?**

You can go home and use the antibiotics to treat *C. difficile* if your diarrhea gets better or has stopped. Take the medicine that your doctor ordered **until it is finished**.

Once you are at home, hand washing is the most important thing that you can do, especially after you use the washroom and before you eat. Try not to share the toilet with another person until the *C. difficile* infection is gone. We know that this may not always be possible.

If you must share the toilet with others, clean the bathroom more often with your usual cleaning products (soap or detergent). To kill *C. difficile* in and on the toilet, use household 5% bleach mixed with water.

- Mix 1 part 5% bleach with 9 parts water.
- Leave it for 10 minutes and then wash off.

This helps to stop the spread of the infection to others.



**If you finish your medicine and the diarrhea returns, it is important to go to your family doctor and make sure to tell them that you had *C. difficile* and were treated in the hospital.**

### **Who can I talk to if I have more questions?**

If you have questions or concerns about stopping infections, ask your nurse to call Infection Prevention and Control.

To find more information about *C. difficile* or preventing infections, visit [www.uhnpatienteducation.ca](http://www.uhnpatienteducation.ca) and search health information.



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