



***C. DIFFICILE*** – diarrhoea  
associated infection

**This leaflet is for people in hospital who have been diagnosed as having a *C. difficile* infection. While not all diarrhoea in hospital means that people have a *C. difficile* infection diarrhoea is the main symptom. Anyone in hospital experiencing diarrhoea should inform a doctor or nurse immediately.**



## 1 What is *C. difficile*?

*C. difficile* or *C. diff* is short for *Clostridium difficile*. It is a type of bacteria (germ) which less than 5% of the population carry in their gut without becoming ill. It is normally kept under control by the 'good' bacteria in the gut. However, when the good bacteria are reduced, e.g. by taking antibiotics, *C. difficile* can multiply and produce toxins (poisons) which can cause diarrhoea. The *C. difficile* bacteria form spores (germs that have a protective coating). These spores are shed in the diarrhoea of an infected person and can survive for a long time in the environment. *C. difficile* is highly infectious and can be spread from patient to patient unless strict hygiene measures are followed.





## 2 How do you catch it?

*C. difficile* infection occurs when spores enter the body through the mouth and are swallowed. Usually a person will be on, or have recently been given, antibiotics for another infection. The normal (good) gut bacteria will be reduced, leaving a patient more vulnerable to infection from *C. difficile* spores. Spores from the environment can be spread to patients in many ways, such as from the hands of healthcare workers, or by patients and visitors who have touched a contaminated surface such as furniture, medical equipment, toilets, handles, sinks and taps. Some people may be carriers of *C. difficile* and the source of their infection will be *C. difficile* living in their gut.

Alcohol hand gels are not effective against *C. difficile* spores. It is important that spores are removed from the hands by thoroughly washing with liquid soap and water then thoroughly drying hands using a paper towel. Do not be afraid to remind staff of this. Remember, you must wash your hands after using the toilet and before eating or handling food; this will help reduce germs spreading. Don't forget to ask for help with this if you need it.



### 3 Who is most at risk of getting *C. difficile*?

People are more at risk of developing *C. difficile* infection if they:

- are over 65;
- are taking, or have recently finished taking, antibiotics or any other medication that may alter the normal bacteria in the gut;
- have a reduced resistance to infection generally;
- have spent a long time in hospital or other type of healthcare setting such as a nursing home;
- have a serious underlying illness; or
- have had bowel surgery.





#### 4 What are the symptoms of *C. difficile*?

The main symptom is explosive diarrhoea, which has a particularly unpleasant smell and may contain mucous or blood. Other symptoms may include stomach cramps, fever, nausea and loss of appetite. Loss of fluids may lead to dehydration, and regular fluid intake will be necessary.

Symptoms may last from a few days to several weeks. In most people, symptoms diminish and they then recover fully. However, some patients may become seriously ill and develop inflammation of the bowel (colitis). If the colitis is severe (pseudomembranous colitis) it can be life threatening.

#### 5 How is *C. difficile* diagnosed?

It is difficult to diagnose *C. difficile* infection by the symptoms alone. Therefore, a sample of diarrhoea is taken and sent to a laboratory for testing for the presence of the *C. difficile* toxin. You can normally expect the result to be available within 48 hours.



## 6 How will *C. difficile* affect my stay in hospital?

You will be nursed in a single room or moved to another ward with other patients who have the same infection. Staff, patients and visitors will need to ensure that they comply with the strict clinical care rules at all times (including when moving through the hospital) until the diarrhoea has stopped and you are discharged or returned to a regular ward. It is very important to maintain good personal hygiene.

Once you have stopped having diarrhoea and have had formed stools for 48–72 hours, you are not considered infectious and can go back to a main ward, although you will be expected to finish your treatment for the *C. difficile* infection. It is important to inform staff immediately if you have any further episodes of diarrhoea.

Being in isolation while unwell can be a difficult time. Your dignity is very important and you must not feel embarrassed to ask for help with personal care. The staff should check on your condition regularly. Please do not hesitate to ask the staff if you do not understand what is happening. The staff are there to help and care for you and answer any questions that you or your relatives may have. If you have any concerns, speak to the nurse in charge. Alternatively, you can contact the Infection Control Department.



## 7 What precautions will staff and visitors have to take?

Hospital staff will take special infection control precautions such as wearing disposable aprons and gloves. *C. difficile* spores are difficult to remove from the environment, and special cleaning measures will be carried out. Staff, patients and visitors should be thorough in their hand washing with soap and water every time they deliver treatment or visit. Alcohol hand gel is not effective against *C. difficile* – soap and water must be used. People should not be afraid to check with staff or visitors if they have washed their hands.

## 8 How is *C. difficile* treated?

The doctor will assess the treatment options and decide which is the most appropriate. *C. difficile* infection can be treated with specific antibiotics. Examples of these are metronidazole and vancomycin, which are usually taken orally for 10–14 days.

You may need to be given fluids intravenously if you become dehydrated. Milder cases may not need any treatment although your doctor may decide to stop any antibiotic that you were previously on. Your condition will be monitored closely and it is important to inform staff if you feel your symptoms are not improving or are becoming worse.



## 9 Can people with *C. difficile* have visitors?

Healthy people are unlikely to develop a *C. difficile* infection, but precautions must still be taken to prevent its spread. In addition to respecting the general visiting rules, visitors must wash their hands with soap and water before and after contact with you and your immediate environment. Disposable gloves and aprons should be worn if they are helping you with personal care. People in the high-risk categories, e.g. recent antibiotic use (see point 3), should be aware of the risks before deciding whether to visit. If they are visiting other patients in the hospital it is best if they see you last.

## 10 Can people with *C. difficile* still send their washing home?

It is best to ask the staff to provide you with hospital nightwear while you are infectious. But if you have any clothing that needs to be taken home to be washed, make sure that these items are washed separately from your normal load and at 60°C. Take care not to overload the machine so that the water can circulate freely, as this will help to rinse away the germs. Some hospitals will provide special bags that can be put straight into your washing machine. If these are not available, disposable gloves should be worn when handling soiled items.



## 11 Can *C. difficile* come back?

There is a 20%–30% chance that the infection and associated symptoms may return up to three months following treatment.

Contact your GP immediately if you develop diarrhoea after you are discharged from hospital. Your discharge notes will state that you had a *C. difficile* infection but make sure that you mention it to the doctor as well. It is important not to take any medicines to stop the diarrhoea (anti-diarrhoeals) while you are suffering from *C. difficile*.

If you have had *C. difficile*, you should be given information when you leave hospital about what to do if you think the *C. difficile* has returned, but if you are not offered this information, please ask for it.

This leaflet has been produced collaboratively between the Department of Health and C-diff Support. For more information, speak to the ward staff, or visit the Department of Health; Clean, Safe Care or C-diff Support websites.

[www.dh.gov.uk/](http://www.dh.gov.uk/)

[www.clean-safe-care.nhs.uk/](http://www.clean-safe-care.nhs.uk/)

[www.cdifff-support.co.uk/](http://www.cdifff-support.co.uk/)



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