



Infection Prevention and Control
Fact Sheet
CLOSTRIDIUM DIFFICILE
Information Sheet for Patients and Visitors

What is C. difficile?

Clostridium difficile (*C. difficile*) is a bacterium that causes mild to severe diarrhea and intestinal conditions like pseudomembranous colitis (inflammation of the colon). *C. difficile* is the most frequent cause of infectious diarrhea in hospitals and long-term care facilities in Canada, as well as in other industrialized countries.

How is it spread?

C. difficile bacteria and their spores are found in feces (bowel movements). People can get infected if they touch surfaces contaminated with feces, and then touch their mouth. Healthcare workers can spread the bacteria to their patients if their hands are contaminated.

Who's at Risk?

The elderly and those with other illnesses or who are taking antibiotics are at a greater risk of infection. For healthy people, *C. difficile* does not pose a health risk.

Most cases of *C. difficile* occur in patients who are taking certain antibiotics in high doses or over a prolonged period of time. Some antibiotics can destroy a person's normal bacteria found in the gut, causing *C. difficile* bacteria to grow. When this occurs, the *C. difficile* bacteria produce toxins, which can damage the bowel and cause diarrhea. However, some people can have *C. difficile* bacteria present in their bowel and not show any symptoms.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms include diarrhea (mild to severe), fever, loss of appetite, nausea, abdominal pain and tenderness. If you have symptoms of *C. diff* infection, your doctor will request that a sample of your diarrhea be tested to see if the harmful toxins are present.

CALL YOUR DOCTOR IF you have any of the following:

- Diarrhea which is bothersome or severe, or which is bloody
- Abdominal pain
- Fever
- Diarrhea which continues after the antibiotic is finished
- Diarrhea which starts after you have finished taking the antibiotic(s).

Inform your doctor that you have recently been on antibiotics.

DO NOT take over-the-counter anti-diarrhea medications that you can buy without a prescription (example Imodium or Kaopectate) without first checking with your doctor. These may cause a more serious health condition.

How can you take care of yourself?

- Follow your doctor's advice regarding rest, activity, medication and diet.
- Clean your hands frequently with soap and water or alcohol based hand rub, especially after using the washroom and before eating or preparing food.
- If your doctor prescribes a new antibiotic for your diarrhea, take all of the medicine as prescribed.
- Be sure that you drink plenty of fluids to keep hydrated.
- If diarrhea persists or comes back, contact your family doctor or healthcare provider.

Can infections with C. diff be treated?

For people with mild symptoms, no treatment may be required. For more severe cases, medication and sometimes surgery may be necessary. There are also new treatments, such as fecal transplantation, currently being studied for treating persistent C. difficile infection.

What does the hospital do to prevent the spread of C. diff?

Hand hygiene, proper antibiotic use (stewardship), and surface cleaning are all very important ways to control the spread of this germ. Early infection control measures soon after patients develop diarrhea, (for example: moving the patient to a private room and using gowns and gloves) helps to prevent spread and protect other patients. An isolation sign is posted at the doorway or curtain so that staff and visitors know they need to take precautions before entering. A sporicidal disinfectant is used to kill the C. diff spores on equipment and for daily room cleaning.

What special precautions are needed at home?

After discharge, patients with C. diff are not a risk for other family members, as person-to-person spread within the home setting is rare. Generally speaking, people in the hospital are sicker and get more infections than people in the community so once home, precautions are not as strict. The following steps can help to reduce the risk of spread to others:

- Patients and household members should always practice good hand hygiene. Thoroughly washing hands with soap and running water after using the toilet, before eating or before preparing foods.
- Caregivers should wash their hands or use alcohol hand rub after providing care and use gloves to handle body fluids or dirty items. Discard disposable gloves in the regular garbage.

No special precautions are required to clean your home. This germ can be destroyed by bleach-based household cleaning products or diluted household bleach. Wet a clean cloth thoroughly with a properly diluted cleaning product or use a pre-packaged disinfectant wipe. Wipe surfaces starting from the cleanest area and moving towards the dirtiest area, paying special attention to areas such as the toilet and bathroom sink. Let the surfaces air dry. This will allow enough contact time with the cleaning product to kill the bacteria.

Questions?

Please contact the RMH Infection Prevention and Control Department

Phone: 705-324-6111 Ext. 4508 or 4527

References:

1. Public Health Agency of Canada <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/infectious-diseases/fact-sheet-clostridium-difficile-difficile.html>
2. Public Health Ontario <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/-/media/documents/cdiff-testing-surveillance-management.pdf?la=en>