

Clostridioides difficile (C. difficile)

Other formats

If you need this information in another format such as audio CD, Braille, large print, high contrast, British Sign Language or translated into another language, please contact the PALS desk on 01392 402093 or at rduh.pals-eastern@nhs.net (for Mid Devon, East Devon and Exeter services) or on 01271 314090 or at rduh.pals-northern@nhs.net (for North Devon services).

What is Clostridioides difficile?

Clostridioides difficile (C. difficile) is a bacterium found in low numbers in the bowel (gut or digestive tract) of approximately 3 - 5% of healthy adults and two thirds of babies, along with a variety of normal, "good" bacteria. It also produces spores which can survive for a long time in the environment.

C. difficile infection causes diarrhoea ranging from mild symptoms to severe illness. This can occur following treatment with some types of commonly used antibiotics. Many of the normal, "good" bacteria will be killed off by these antibiotics, allowing the C. difficile bacteria to multiply in the gut and produce a toxin which can damage the lining of the intestine, resulting in diarrhoea.

What are the symptoms of C. difficile infection?

- Diarrhoea ranging from mild to severe
- Abdominal cramps
- Loss of appetite
- Fever
- Nausea

Who is at risk of getting C. difficile?

- Anyone taking antibiotics. Taking more than one type of antibiotic increases the risk.
- People in hospital, especially elderly patients.
- People with inflammatory bowel disease.

- People who have had surgery on the stomach and/or bowel.
- People being treated for cancer.
- People taking Proton Pump Inhibitors (PPI), for example Omeprazole or Lansoprazole.

Will I have any tests to confirm C. difficile infection?

A stool specimen (sample of your diarrhoea) will be required. Your doctor or nurse will explain how this is to be obtained. The specimen will then be sent for analysis to confirm whether or not you have C. difficile infection.

How can C. difficile be treated?

- Where possible, any antibiotics you are already taking will be stopped. The C. difficile symptoms may then subside without further treatment. However, you may be given an antibiotic specifically to treat the C. difficile infection. If so, the prescriber will instruct you on its use.
- It is very important that you do not become dehydrated. You should therefore continue to drink plenty of fluids to reduce this risk.
- Sometimes, additional treatments are required particularly if you have severe C. difficile infection.

How is C. difficile infection spread?

When C. difficile causes diarrhoea, it can contaminate the environment, where spores survive for long periods. It can then be picked up on other people's hands, and can be transferred into the stomach and bowel via hand to mouth contact.

How do we prevent the spread of infection?

- The most important method of preventing spread is to wash your hands carefully with soap and water after you've been to the toilet and also before eating.
- Healthcare staff prevent the spread of infection by ensuring they wash their hands using soap and water, wearing gloves and aprons when giving care such as washing patients and when assisting patients who require the toilet.
- It is important that everyone cleans their hands after having contact with you or your immediate environment. Please feel free to ask staff to provide you with hand washing facilities when you need them and also prompt them or anyone else involved in your care to clean their own hands if you think they may have forgotten.

Whilst I'm in hospital will anything be different about my care?

- You may be moved into a single room in order to reduce the risk of infection to other patients. Alternatively, you may be nursed in a bay/small ward with other patients who are similarly affected.

- Staff will wear gloves and aprons when giving you personal care to prevent spread to other patients.
- A designated commode or toilet will be assigned for your personal use to prevent spread to other patients.
- A sign will be placed on your room door to remind everyone who enters your room about personal protective equipment.
- Assessment of your bowel movements helps to identify how you are improving. A stool record will be used to record every time you open your bowels. Alternatively, your nurse may ask you to do this.
- These precautions will continue until you have completed any prescribed treatment, had no diarrhoea for 2 days and a return to normal bowel habit.

Besides the regular monitoring that your consultant and their team carry out, your progress will be reviewed by a multi-disciplinary team consisting of a consultant microbiologist, a pharmacist, an infection control nurse specialist and, if required, a dietician.

Will this affect my family and other visitors?

- Family and friends can still visit you, including children and pregnant women. If any of your visitors are at risk (see “Who is at risk?” section), ask a member of staff for advice.
- It is **not** necessary for visitors to wear gloves and aprons. If they are involved in your care, for example helping you to use the toilet, they should **wash their hands** thoroughly afterwards.
- It is important that all your visitors wash their hands on leaving your room or bed area.

Laundering your personal clothing items

The following information is for relatives/friends washing clothes at home, to handle your personal clothing safely if it is soiled.

- Wash soiled items as soon as possible.
- If a soluble laundry bag has been used for the soiled clothes, it can go directly into your washing machine at home, without removing the clothes. Clothes should be washed at 40 degrees to ensure the bag dissolves fully.
- Alternately, if an ordinary plastic bag has been used, you will need to remove clothes from the plastic bag and put them into the washing machine. If you need to handle the clothes, ensure you wash your hands afterwards.
- Wash the clothing separately from your other home laundry.
- Always hold the clothing away from you when putting it into the washing machine.
- Do not shake the clothing.
- Use normal washing powder or liquid.

- Clean the area around your washing machine, such as the door of the machine and worktops, with your usual kitchen cleaner.
- Tumble dry and iron clothes where possible (following manufacturer's guidance).

What type of follow-up care do I need?

- Once the symptoms have stopped and you have taken the full course of specific antibiotics for C. diff infection, there is no need for follow-up.
- There is a possibility that the infection and associated symptoms may return within the first three weeks following treatment. If your symptoms do come back, you should contact your doctor. You should not take any form of anti-diarrhoeal medication.

Further information

If you have any questions that we have not answered in this leaflet, please ask your nurse or doctor caring for you on the ward or contact one of the Infection Control nurses.

For Eastern services, call 01392 402355.

For Northern services, call 01271 322680.

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) ensures that the NHS listens to patients, relatives, carers and friends, answers questions and resolves concerns as quickly as possible. If you have a query or concern, please contact:

PALS Mid Devon, East Devon and Exeter

- call 01392 402093 or email rduh.pals-eastern@nhs.net. You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital in Wonford, Exeter.

PALS North Devon

- call 01271 314090 or email rduh.pals-northern@nhs.net. You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at the North Devon District Hospital in Barnstaple.

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Tell us about your experience of our services. Share your feedback on the Care Opinion website www.careopinion.org.uk.

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