

Clostridium Difficile

C. difficile, also known as *C. diff*, are bacteria that live in the bowel of up to 7% of people without causing illness. Your intestines normally contain many good bacteria that help you digest food and stay healthy. When antibiotics are taken to treat an illness, these good bacteria may be killed. *C. diff* bacteria are not killed by common antibiotics and continue to grow, which may cause illness.

C. diff produces toxins that can cause damage to cells in the intestines. The most common symptom of *C. diff* infection is diarrhea. In fact, it is the most frequent cause of infectious diarrhea in hospitals and health care facilities. *C. diff* infections may lead to serious illness.

WHO IS MOST AT RISK?

For most healthy people, *C. diff* is not a health risk. Those at greater risk of infection include:

- + People who are taking antibiotics.
- + People undergoing cancer chemotherapy.
- + People who have other illnesses.
- + The elderly.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

A *C. diff* infection may cause:

- + Watery diarrhea.
- + Fever.
- + Loss of appetite.
- + Nausea.
- + Abdominal pain and tenderness.

In cases where a patient has severe diarrhea, it can lead to complications including dehydration and

colitis (inflammation of the lower intestine or colon). In some cases, *C. diff* may cause no symptoms. In rare cases, the infection can cause death.

HOW IS C. DIFF SPREAD?

C. diff bacteria and their spores are found in feces. The spores can live outside your body for weeks or months. They may be found on items you touch such as bed linens, bed rails, bathroom fixtures and medical equipment. You can become infected if you touch a surface contaminated with feces and then touch your mouth, or if you eat or drink something that is contaminated.

Healthcare workers, staff and visitors can spread the infection to you if their hands have come in contact with *C. diff* bacteria, and have not properly cleaned their hands before touching you, or touching items that you might eat or drink.

C. diff bacteria are not spread through the air. You cannot get *C. diff* from someone sneezing or coughing.

HOW CAN I PREVENT THE SPREAD OF C. DIFF?

The best way to stop the spread of *C. diff* is to regularly wash your hands with soap and water, especially after using the toilet and before you eat. Use an alcohol-based hand rub (ABHR, also

known as hand sanitizer) if soap and water are not available.

If you are admitted to a health care facility and develop symptoms, such as diarrhea, that are either confirmed or suspected to be from *C. diff* infection, you will be moved to a room by yourself. You will also be put on contact precautions to try to prevent spreading the infection to others.

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO WASH MY HANDS?

To wash your hands properly, follow the steps below:

- + Remove rings or other jewelry on your hands and wrists.
- + Wet your hands with warm water.
- + Wash all parts of your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, and rub your hands together to create lather. To help children wash their hands, sing the alphabet song.
- + Rinse hands well under warm running water.
- + Dry your hands with a clean cloth or paper towel.
- + Use the towel to turn off the tap and open the door when you leave if you are in a public restroom.

If washing hands frequently apply hand cream often to prevent skin breakdown.

For more information on hand washing, see the link in the “Relevant Resources” section.

WHAT ARE CONTACT PRECAUTIONS?

Contact precautions are actions taken by health care facilities to try to prevent the spread of *C. diff* bacteria to other patients.

Contact precautions include placing all patients with suspected and confirmed cases of *C. diff* infection into single rooms. If single rooms are not available, patients may share a room if they have the same infection. A “Contact

Precautions” sign will be placed outside the door. Before entering the room of a patient who has or is suspected of having *C. diff* infection, the following contact precautions must be taken by health care providers, staff and visitors:

- + Wash your hands.
- + Put an isolation gown on over your clothing. This will help to avoid contact with any contaminated surfaces or with the patient.
- + Put on non-sterile gloves.

When leaving a patient’s room, the following actions must be taken:

- + Remove gloves immediately and throw them in the garbage.
- + Wash your hands.
- + Remove isolation gown without touching the outside of the gown and place it in the linen hamper provided.
- + Wash your hands for a second time before exiting the room.

Health care facilities will also frequently clean surfaces with sporicidal agents to reduce the number of bacteria.

WHAT ARE THE TREATMENTS?

The first step in treating a *C. diff* infection is to stop taking the antibiotic that led to the infection. However, you should not stop taking your antibiotics until you have been told to do so by your health care provider. Although antibiotics may cause *C. diff* infection, antibiotics can also be used to treat *C. diff*. Your health care provider will prescribe an antibiotic to treat your *C. diff* infection. If antibiotic treatment is unsuccessful, fecal microbiota transplant (stool from a healthy donor) is now becoming an available option. Discuss this treatment with your health care provider. In rare cases, surgery may be considered if all other treatments have not worked, or the symptoms are very severe.

Clostridium Difficile - Continued

TO LEARN MORE ASK

- + Your family doctor.
- + HealthLinkBC - call 8-1-1 (7-1-1 for deaf or hard of hearing) or go online to www.HealthLinkBC.ca

RECOMMENDED FOLLOW UP

- Follow up with your primary care provider in ___ days.

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Find this information sheet on the BC Emergency Medicine Network website:

www.bcemn.ca/clinical_resource/clostridium-difficile/

bcemn.ca

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