
What is *Clostridium difficile*?

Clostridium difficile (sometimes referred to as *C. diff*) is a bacterium (germ) that can sometimes be found in the gut of healthy adults, children and babies. This is not usually a problem as other normal germs keep it under control.

It is a tough germ that can survive outside the body e.g. on floors and around toilets. Heat and chemical disinfectants do not always kill it off.

When is it a problem?

Antibiotics or some cancer drugs can destroy some of the normal healthy bacteria of the gut. This may help *C. difficile* to grow and produce poisons (toxins). Mild diarrhoea is all that will result in most cases. However, a small number of people may develop a more serious illness, which can be fatal. This happens because of bleeding from the bowel or a burst (perforated) gut. There are different types of *C. difficile*. Not all cause disease and patients who have it in their gut may remain healthy.

Who can get it?

The elderly are the most likely to get ill from it, especially those who have a serious disease. However, any patient taking antibiotic treatment is at risk. It is important that a full course of antibiotics is completed. Seek medical advice if diarrhoea develops – don't just stop taking your medicine.

How does it spread?

Antibiotics help the germ to grow in the body but it can pass from one person to another. A person with *C. difficile* diarrhoea can easily contaminate the area around their bed, commode or toilet area. Having got onto hands and then food or drink, the germ gets into the body by being swallowed.

What are the symptoms

Diarrhoea is the most common symptom but a person can also get abdominal (tummy) pain or fever. Most patients get over it fully after a mild illness. Some patients (usually elderly) because of the diarrhoea who lose a lot of fluids may become seriously ill. A small number of patients will get a swollen tummy and bloody diarrhoea. Again this can be very serious.

How common is it?

C. difficile has been a known cause of diarrhoea since the 1970s. Numbers of cases across the UK have increased but this is probably because better tests have been developed. In the Borders we see about 50 cases per year.

Hospital outbreaks do happen especially with the types of *C. difficile* that cause more serious disease as they produce much more toxin than others.

Can it be treated?

Fortunately, most patients develop only a mild illness. A quick recovery usually happens by stopping antibiotics (where possible) together with increasing fluids (either by drinking or intravenous drip). Some people (as many as one in four) find their symptoms get better more slowly with good and bad days before everything settles back to normal. It may be necessary to give specific treatment against *C. difficile*. Sometimes using 'probiotic' drinks or foods (such as live yoghurt) can help to replace and restore the balance of 'good' bacteria in the gut.

Can it be prevented?

Patients with diarrhoea, especially if severe or incontinent (loss of control), may spread the infection to other patients. They should therefore be nursed in a single room. Staff should wear disposable gloves and aprons when caring for infected patients. Great care should be given to cleaning with warm water and a liquid soap or detergent. This is the best way of removing the germ from the contaminated environment. However, thorough washing of hands with liquid soap and water by health care staff and visitors before and after patient contact comes top of the list in preventing person-to-person spread. Alcohol hand gels are not effective against *C. difficile*.

A patient can be moved to the open ward once they have had no diarrhoea for a full 48 hours, unless there is another reason to keep them in the single room.

Need further advice or information?

- ❖ NHS Inform www.nhsinform.co.uk
- ❖ NHS24 ☎ 111 www.nhs24.co.uk
- ❖ www.nhsborders.scot.nhs.uk
- ❖ Local health clinic or GP

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June 2014