

Infection prevention and control

# *Clostridioides difficile* (*C. difficile*) infection

## Information for patients, relatives and carers

### What is *clostridioides difficile*?

*Clostridioides difficile* (*C. difficile*) also known 'C. diff' is a bacterium that can be found in people's intestines (their 'digestive tract' or 'gut'). However, it does not cause disease just by being there; it can be found in healthy people (about 3 in every 100 adults and 2 in every 3 of babies) with no symptoms.

Other normal bacteria living in the gut usually keep *C. difficile* under control. However, some antibiotics can change the balance of bacteria. This gives *C. difficile* an advantage over the helpful bacteria and it can grow to unusually high levels. This allows the toxin it produces to reach levels where it attacks the intestine and causes symptoms of disease.

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

The main symptom is diarrhoea. This is normally mild but uncomfortable.

If *C. difficile* is suspected, a specimen of stool (poo) will be collected and sent for testing.

In most cases, diarrhoea settles without anything getting worse. However, in some people, particularly the elderly, it might lead to dehydration and severe inflammation of the bowel.

Other symptoms can include fever, nausea and abdominal tenderness.

Some people may not have any symptoms.

### How can it be treated?

Where possible, any antibiotics the patient is taking will be stopped, along with any laxatives or motility agents (which help food move through the gut).

*C. difficile* can be treated with specific antibiotics that are taken by mouth.

However, if symptoms carry on or a patient suffers a relapse, other treatment may be considered by the healthcare team.

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## How we stop *C. difficile* from spreading

We take three basic steps to prevent *C. difficile* spreading from one patient to another:

### Isolation

We assess every patient who develops diarrhoea to determine whether it was caused by an infectious agent or was due to another reason. This could be the overuse of laxatives, other medical conditions, and tube feedings.

If there is any possibility that the diarrhoea is infectious, we will place that patient in isolation (usually in a single room) to prevent other patients from being exposed. Wherever possible, the patient will have his or her own toilet facilities.

Healthcare staff will wear gloves and aprons during direct patient contact for patients with *C. difficile*. They will also clean their hands before putting on their gloves and wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water after removing their gloves and before attending to another patient.

### Washing hands with soap and water

*C. difficile* can produce spores that are not killed by alcohol hand gel. This means that staff must wash their hands with soap and water rather than alcohol hand gel when caring for patients with *C. difficile*.

### Cleaning

The spores formed by *C. difficile* can survive for long periods in the environment, for example on floors, bedpans, curtains, and other surfaces. For this reason, we ensure that these areas are rigorously cleaned, and curtains changed. We use bleach solutions to remove *C. difficile* spores. This reduces the risk of other patients, visitors and staff in the area picking up the *C. difficile* infection.

## Advice if you have *C. difficile* diarrhoea

- when going home from hospital, continue to wash your hands frequently with soap and warm water
- make sure all accidents, particularly when using the toilet, are cleaned up immediately. The area can be cleaned with dilute bleach if necessary. Clean the toilet bowl, flush handle and basin taps often with bleach until at least 48 hours after diarrhoea and other symptoms have stopped
- soiled clothing can be washed as normal at the recommended temperature for the fabric
- if you are particularly concerned about your health or that of a member of your family or household, telephone your GP for advice

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## Is your family at risk?

Another person may get *C. difficile* infection by ingesting the bacteria through contact with the contaminated environment or patient. **So, good hand hygiene and cleaning are important.**

Once someone no longer has symptoms, they are not considered a risk to others even if they continue to carry the *C. difficile* in their gut. In most healthy people the *C. difficile* will not be able to multiply in the gut and they will not develop the disease.

## Further information

Please speak to your doctor or nurse in the first instance if you have any questions or concerns about *C. difficile* or other aspects of your treatment.

If symptoms come back, you should see or contact your GP or call NHS 111 if you're concerned or feel you need advice.

For general infection prevention and control information, please contact the infection prevention and control team via our hospital switchboard on **020 3312 6666**.

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## How do I make a comment about my visit?

We aim to provide the best possible service and staff will be happy to answer any of the questions you may have. If you have any **suggestions** or **comments** about your visit, please either speak to a member of staff or contact the patient advice and liaison service (**PALS**) on **020 3312 7777** (10.00 – 16.00, Monday to Friday). You can also email PALS at [imperial.pals@nhs.net](mailto:imperial.pals@nhs.net) The PALS team will listen to your concerns, suggestions or queries and is often able to help solve problems on your behalf.

Alternatively, you may wish to complain by contacting our complaints department:

Complaints department, fourth floor, Salton House, St Mary's Hospital, Praed Street  
London W2 1NY

Email: [ICHC-tr.Complaints@nhs.net](mailto:ICHC-tr.Complaints@nhs.net)

Telephone: **020 3312 1337 / 1349**

### Alternative formats

This leaflet can be provided on request in large print or easy read, as a sound recording, in Braille or in alternative languages. Please email the communications team:  
[imperial.communications@nhs.net](mailto:imperial.communications@nhs.net)

## Wi-fi

Wi-fi is available at our Trust. For more information visit our website: [www.imperial.nhs.uk](http://www.imperial.nhs.uk)

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