Infection prevention and control team

Clostridium difficile (C. difficile)

Information for patients, families and carers

Introduction

Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust staff take infection prevention and control seriously. All staff receive regular training on infection prevention and control and should be able to answer any questions or concerns you may have.

Many hospital infections can be avoided. To control hospital infections effectively we need the support and cooperation of patients and visitors as well as staff.

What is Clostridium difficile (C. difficile)?

*Clostridium difficile*, more commonly known as *C. difficile*, is a bacterium which lives in the gut of about five per cent of healthy people. The amount of *C. difficile* in the gut is kept under control by all the other normal bacteria living there, which means it does not usually cause any harm.

If a patient takes a course of antibiotics (whether in hospital or at home), some of the normal gut bacteria might be killed. That may in turn alter the balance of bacteria in the gut. If this happens, *C. difficile* is able to multiply to large numbers. Some forms of *C. difficile* produce chemicals or toxins that damage the gut lining and cause diarrhoea.

If a patient has diarrhoea caused by *C. difficile*, large numbers of the bacteria will be released from the gut into the environment. *C. difficile* produces spores which can survive in the environment for a long time and can infect other people who come into contact with them.

Older people are at most risk – over 80 per cent of cases are reported in people over the age of 65 years. Patients with low immunity due to disease or treatment are also at greater risk.

What are the symptoms of C. difficile infection?

The main symptom is diarrhoea, which is normally mild but uncomfortable. If *C. difficile* is suspected as the cause, a specimen of faeces will be collected and sent for testing. In most cases diarrhoea settles without complications. However, in some people, particularly the elderly, it might lead to dehydration and severe inflammation of the bowel.
Other symptoms can include fever, loss of appetite, nausea and abdominal pain or tenderness. Some people may not have any symptoms.

How can it be treated?

Where possible, any antibiotics the patient is taking will be stopped. *C. difficile* can be treated with specific antibiotics that are taken orally. However, if symptoms persist or a patient suffers a relapse, other treatment may be considered by a doctor.

Can *C. difficile* cause serious harm to my gut?

Rarely *C. difficile* may cause severe symptoms called colitis. This can cause extensive damage to the gut or septicaemia (blood poisoning) and may very occasionally lead to death.

How can infection be prevented?

The key to preventing *C. difficile* infection arising in the first place is to avoid using antibiotics wherever possible. This is why doctors do not prescribe antibiotics for minor coughs and colds.

When doctors do prescribe antibiotics, they try to choose an antibiotic which will treat the condition but will not affect the body’s normal bacteria. It might sometimes be a difficult balance to achieve, especially if a patient is very unwell. Hospitals have antibiotic policies to help make sure that the most appropriate antibiotics are used and that broad-spectrum antibiotics (these are antibiotics used to treat a wide range of bacteria) are only administered when they are absolutely essential.

What do we do to prevent *C. difficile* from spreading?

We take three basic steps to prevent *C. difficile* from 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 it was due to another reason, such as the overuse of laxatives. 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.

Healthcare staff will wear gloves and aprons while caring for the patient. They will also ensure that they clean their hands before putting on their gloves, and wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water after removing their gloves and before tending to another patient. Wherever possible, the patient will also have his/her own toilet facilities which will not be shared by others.

The patient will remain in isolation for around 48 to 72 hours after the diarrhoea has settled.

**Washing your hands**

*C. difficile* can produce spores which 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* infection.
Cleaning

The spores formed by *C. difficile* are able to survive for long periods in the environment, for example on floors, bed rails or around toilet seats. For this reason we ensure that these areas are rigorously cleaned. We use bleach solutions to remove *C. difficile* spores so that the infection cannot be picked up by other patients in the area.

Advice for people who have had *C. difficile* diarrhoea

- If you have had *C. difficile* diarrhoea and are 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. Also clean the toilet bowl, flush handle and basin taps frequently with bleach until at least 48 hours after all symptoms have stopped.

- Soiled clothing can be washed on a normal wash at the recommended temperature for the fabric.

If you are particularly concerned about your health or a member of your family or household, telephone your GP for advice or NHS 111.

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.

For general infection prevention and control information, please contact the infection prevention and control team on 020 3312 6201.

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 3313 0088 (Charing Cross, Hammersmith and Queen Charlotte’s & Chelsea hospitals), or 020 3312 7777 (St Mary’s and Western Eye hospitals). You can also email PALS at *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

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

Wi-fi

We have a free wi-fi service for basic filtered browsing and a premium wi-fi service (requiring payment) at each of our five hospitals. Look for WiFiSPARK_FREE or WiFiSPARK_PREMIUM