

# Clostridium difficile (C. difficile or C. diff)

Information and advice for patients

## *Infection Prevention and Control*

### What is Clostridium difficile (C. difficile)?

*Clostridium difficile* is a bacterium (germ) that can be found in the gut of about 3 in 100 people. Where there are small numbers of the bacterium it does not cause any problems; however, in large numbers it can cause diarrhoea and colitis (inflammation of the colon).

### How do people get Clostridium difficile?

A large number of people get *C. difficile* after using antibiotics. Occasionally, antibiotics which are prescribed to fight other infections can kill the 'good' bacteria in the gut. When this happens *C. difficile* is able to grow and multiply in the gut causing symptoms. *C. difficile* is also contagious and can be caught from contaminated items, surfaces and hands.

### Who is most at risk?

People can carry the *C. difficile* bacterium in their gut without having any symptoms of the infection. However, there are certain risk factors that may make a person more prone to a *C. difficile* infection (experience symptoms of *C. difficile*). These include those who have:

- recently had antibiotics
- had bowel surgery
- malnutrition

If you have any concerns please speak to your GP who knows your full medical history.

### What are the symptoms of Clostridium difficile?

The symptoms of *C. difficile* are:

- Watery diarrhoea
- Fever (high temperature)
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea (feeling sick)
- Tummy pain/tenderness

In the majority of people the illness is mild and they make a full recovery, although some may become dehydrated as a consequence of the diarrhoea. Unlike some other causes of diarrhoea, it is rare for *C. difficile* to spread to other parts of the body such as the bloodstream.

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### **How is Clostridium difficile diagnosed?**

*C. difficile* is diagnosed by examining a sample of stool (faeces/poo) in the laboratory, to look for the bacterium (germ).

Occasionally, in very young children or in people who have recently been treated for *C. difficile* infection, large amounts of the germ may be found in their stool without causing any symptoms. The reason for this is unknown, but it means that routine screening for *C. difficile* in patients without symptoms is not useful.

### **How is Clostridium difficile treated?**

If you are diagnosed with a *C. difficile* infection your doctor will prescribe you a course of antibiotics (Metronidazole or vancomycin) which will fight the infection. You will usually need to take these tablets for 2 weeks but any medication should only be stopped under the advice of your hospital doctor or GP. Sometimes a longer course of tablets may be needed, or a different type of medication.

To help replace any fluid loss caused by your diarrhoea you will also need to increase your fluid intake.

If you have any known allergies to any of these drugs you must let your doctor know prior to starting treatment. If you are prescribed metronidazole you should avoid alcohol.

### **What are the benefits of treatment?**

Successful treatment usually means that an infected person recovers without any major complications.

### **What are the risks of treatment?**

In up to 3 in 10 patients the symptoms may come back after treatment, which may require another course of antibiotics. If you develop any symptoms and are in hospital please let the nurse or doctor caring for you know; if you are at home please see your GP.

Common side effects of the antibiotics include nausea (feeling sick) and vomiting.

### **What are the risks of not getting treatment?**

If you do not take your antibiotics or complete the full course given, your infection may become worse and in severe cases may be fatal.

### **Are there any alternative treatments?**

There are no other effective treatments for *Clostridium difficile*, although sometimes a combination of antibiotics is used.

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### **How can the spread of Clostridium difficile be prevented?**

You are considered infectious and can pass *C. difficile* on to others whilst you have diarrhoea and until you have been symptom-free for 48 hours. Being symptom-free means that you are eating and drinking normally for you and have passed a formed bowel movement (stool). You can also still carry the *C. difficile* bacterium and not have any symptoms; under these circumstances you are not considered 'infectious' but it is still important to follow the advice below to reduce the risk of passing it to others.

### **If you are in hospital**

If you have diarrhoea, especially if it is severe or you are also incontinent, you may unintentionally spread the infection to other patients. Therefore, to reduce the risk of spreading *C. difficile* to other sick patients you will need to be isolated (nursed in a side room) while you have symptoms of diarrhoea. You can come out of the isolation room when your diarrhoea has stopped and you start to have soft or formed bowel movements (stool) for more than 48 hours and you are eating normally.

To help ensure the bacteria is not passed onto others:

- All staff, patients and visitors will need to wash their hands with soap and water before and after contact with you. Alcohol hand gel is not effective against *C. difficile*.
- You should wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water after using the toilet and before eating and drinking.
- There will be increased cleaning in your room.
- Staff caring for you will need to wear an apron and gloves.
- All visitors should see the nurse in charge before visiting you.
- If any of your visitors are taking antibiotics they may be at some risk of infection and therefore should be especially scrupulous in their hand washing.
- Your visitors should not sit on your bed and should wash their hands before leaving your room.

### **If you are not in hospital**

Whilst you have symptoms you should not go to work or school until you have soft or formed bowel movements (stool) for more than 48 hours and you are eating normally. It is also important that you wash your hands with soap and water after using the toilet and before handling food to reduce the risk of passing the bacterium to others and make sure that any objects, surfaces, bedding, clothes, towels etc that you use are thoroughly cleaned.

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### **Is there anything else I should do?**

You must remain vigilant even after your symptoms have stopped because *C. difficile* can re-occur up to 6 months later. Therefore, you should continue to maintain high standards of personal hygiene and should notify the nurse/doctor caring for you (if you are in hospital) or your practice nurse/GP (if you are at home) if you experience any symptoms so that we can quickly identify the illness and start treatment if necessary.

### **Contact details**

If you have any questions or concerns please speak to the doctor looking after you, your GP or the hospital.

### **Hospital Infection Prevention and Control Service**

0121 554 3801 (ask for Infection Prevention and Control Service)

### **Further Information**

#### **NHS Choices**

[www.nhs.uk/conditions/clostridium-difficile](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/clostridium-difficile)

#### **NHS Direct**

For health information and reassurance:

[www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)

#### **Health Protection Agency (HPA)**

[www.hpa.org.uk](http://www.hpa.org.uk)

For more information about our hospitals and services please see our websites [www.swbh.nhs.uk](http://www.swbh.nhs.uk) and [www.swbhengage.com](http://www.swbhengage.com), follow us on Twitter @SWBHnhs and like us on Facebook [www.facebook.com/SWBHnhs](http://www.facebook.com/SWBHnhs).

Further Infection Prevention and Control information leaflets can be found on our website, or you can ask a member of staff for a copy. You may find the following leaflet useful:

- Helping us to reduce the risk of cross infection

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### Sources used for the information in this leaflet

- Department of Health, 'Clostridium difficile infection: how to deal with the problem', 2009
- NHS Evidence Clinical Knowledge Summaries, 'Diarrhoea – antibiotic associated', September 2009

If you would like to suggest any amendments or improvements to this leaflet please contact the communications department on 0121 507 5495 or email: [swb-tr.swbh-gm-patient-information@nhs.net](mailto:swb-tr.swbh-gm-patient-information@nhs.net)



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