

Clostridium difficile (C. difficile) Fact Sheet

Information for Healthcare Workers

What is clostridium difficile (c. difficile)?

C. difficile is one of the many germs (bacteria) that can be found in stool (a bowel movement).

What is C. difficile infection?

C. difficile infection occurs when certain antibiotics kill your normal bowel bacteria and allow the *C. difficile* to grow. The use of antibiotics increases the chances of developing *C. difficile* diarrhea because antibiotics alter the normal levels of good bacteria found in the intestines and colon. When there are fewer good bacteria, *C. difficile* can thrive and produce toxins that can cause an infection. These toxins can damage the bowel and may cause diarrhea. *C. difficile* infection is usually mild but sometimes can be severe. In severe cases, surgery may be needed. *C. difficile* is the most common cause of infectious diarrhea in hospital. Symptoms include watery diarrhea, fever, loss of appetite, nausea, and abdominal pain/tenderness.

How do people get C. difficile?

C. difficile bacteria and their spores are found in feces. People can get infected if they touch surfaces contaminated with feces, and then touch their mouth. Healthcare workers can spread the bacteria to their patients if their hands are contaminated.

For healthy people, *C. difficile* does not pose a health risk. The elderly and those with other illnesses or who are taking antibiotics, are at a greater risk of infection.

What can be done to prevent the spread of C. difficile?

As with any infectious disease, frequent hand hygiene is the most effective way of preventing the transmission of healthcare associated infections. Hand washing with soap and water is important during *C. difficile* outbreaks and is one of the best defenses against further spread of the bacteria.

If you do not have access to soap and water, frequent use of alcohol-based hand rubs is encouraged. Most healthcare facilities provide alcohol-based hand rubs at entrances. Be sure to use them but be aware that they are less effective than washing with soap and water as they do not destroy *C. difficile* spores.

If you work in or visit a hospital or long-term healthcare facility, wash your hands often preferably with soap and water, especially after using the toilet. Gloves should be worn when caring for a patient with *C. difficile* infection or if in contact with his/her environment. Use a new pair of gloves and gown when caring for each patient. Be sure to wash your hands with soap and water after removing your gloves.

When antibiotics are prescribed, follow your doctor, pharmacist, or healthcare provider's instructions and the directions on the label. Keep taking the antibiotics as prescribed to kill all the *C. difficile* bacteria.

If you have concerns about *C. difficile* and medication you are currently using, talk to your doctor, pharmacist, or healthcare provider.

How is it treated?

Treatment depends on how sick a person is with the infection. People with mild symptoms may not need treatment. For more severe infection, an antibiotic is given.

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What puts a healthcare worker at risk of getting C. difficile infection?

People in healthcare settings are most at risk of acquiring this type of infection because *C. difficile* is often a healthcare-associated infection. These types of infections can be transmitted within a hospital when infection prevention and control measures are not followed. Those at higher risk include the elderly, people with severe underlying illness, and people taking certain antibiotics (especially over a prolonged period of time) or cancer chemotherapy. In addition, patients taking stomach ulcer drugs, known as proton pump inhibitors, are at increased risk for contracting *C. difficile* infection.

Can a healthcare worker go to work with C. difficile?

When possible, a person with active diarrhea caused by a *C. difficile* infection should be restricted from work or group activities for 48 hours after diarrhea has resolved. A negative test is **NOT** required for an individual to be cleared to work or participate in group activities.

What to do at home?

Healthy people like family and friends who are not taking antibiotics are at very low risk of getting *C. difficile* infection.

Hand Care

Wash hands for 15 seconds:

- after using the toilet
- after touching dirty surfaces
- before eating
- before preparing meals

Cleaning the house

Use either a household cleaner diluted according to the instructions or diluted household bleach:

- Wet the surface well and clean using good friction.
- Allow the surface to air dry.
- Pay special attention to areas that may be soiled with stool such as the toilet and sink. If you see stool, remove first and then clean as described above.

Cleaning clothes/other fabric

Wash clothes/fabric separately if they are heavily soiled with stool:

- Rinse stool off.
- Clean in a hot water cycle with soap.
- Dry items in the dryer if possible.

Cleaning dishes

No special cleaning is required. The dishwasher can be used, or clean dishes by hand with soap and warm water.

Should any medication be taken?

It is very important that all medication is taken as prescribed by your healthcare provider. Drugs from the drugstore that will stop diarrhea should not be used. (e.g., Imodium).

If diarrhea persists or comes back, a healthcare provider should be contacted.