

Clostridium difficile

What is *Clostridium difficile*?

Clostridium difficile (also known as *C.difficile* or *C.diff*) is one of the many germs (bacteria) sometimes found in the intestines.

How do people get *C.diff* ?

C.diff germs and their spores are present in diarrhea of a person with a *C.diff* infection. Others can become infected if they touch a surface (toilet, bedpan, bed railing, etc.) covered with *C.diff*, and then touch their mouths. Health care providers can also spread this germ if they don't clean their hands prior to caring for their patients.

How does *C.diff* make people sick?

Although antibiotics can be life saving medications, they also destroy the good germs in a person's intestines. When this happens, *C.diff* if present will grow to unusually high levels in the intestines and make dangerous toxins. These toxins can damage the intestines and may cause diarrhea. Infection with *C.diff* is usually mild but sometimes can be severe. In severe cases, surgery may be needed and in extreme cases infection with *C.diff* may cause death. Infection with *C.diff* doesn't usually make healthy people sick, whereas, older hospitalized persons taking antibiotics are at the highest risk of severe illness.

What are the symptoms of an infection with *C.diff* ?

Symptoms include diarrhea (mild or severe), fever, loss of appetite, nausea, abdominal pain and tenderness. If you have symptoms of *C.diff* infection, your doctor will request that a sample of your diarrhea be tested to see if the dangerous toxins are present.

Can infections with *C.diff* be treated?

Treatment depends on how sick a person is with an infection caused by *C.diff*. People with mild symptoms may not need treatment. For more severe infections, medications such as antibiotics are given and sometimes surgery is necessary.

What does The Ottawa Hospital (TOH) do to prevent the spread of the *C.diff* germ?

Hand washing is the most important way for everyone to prevent the spread of this germ. At TOH patient safety is very important. Our goal is to always identify patients with *C.diff* infections quickly and institute infection control measures accordingly. If you develop diarrhea you will be moved to a private room, and your health care provider will care for you wearing gloves and maybe a gown. During the time you have diarrhea, you will be asked to stay in your room; however, you may still have visitors. We will ask your visitors to clean their hands upon entering and exiting your room.

What special precautions are needed for *C.diff* at home?

Generally speaking, people in the hospital are sicker and get more infections than people in the community. Once home, precautions need not be as strict. Nonetheless, certain steps can help reduce the risk of spreading this germ to family members and other visitors.

Wash your hands for at least 15 seconds after using the toilet, before eating or before preparing food. Caregivers should wash their hands after providing care. Gloves should be used to handle body fluids or dirty items. Discard disposable gloves in the regular garbage or clean rubber gloves after use.

No special precautions are required to clean your home. This germ can be destroyed by most household cleaning products or diluted household bleach. Wet a clean cloth thoroughly with a properly diluted cleaning product. Wipe surfaces starting from the cleanest area and moving towards the dirtiest area, paying special attention to areas such as the toilet and bathroom sink. Let the surfaces air dry. This will allow enough contact time with the cleaning product to kill the bacteria.

What do I need to know prior to discharge?

Your health care provider will review good hygiene practices with you before you go home. It is very important that you take all your medication as prescribed by your doctor. You should not use any drugs from the drugstore that will stop your diarrhea (e.g. Imodium). **If diarrhea persists or comes back, contact your family doctor.**

If you want to know more about *Clostridium difficile* infection:

Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care Ontario: <http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/ccom/cdi/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <http://www.cdc.gov/hai/organisms/cdiff/Cdiff-patient.html>