



Patient Information Sheet  
*Clostridium difficile* (*C difficile*)

**What is *C difficile*?**

**How do people get *C difficile*?**

**How do I know if I have *C difficile*?**

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

**Who is at risk of getting an infection with *C difficile*?**

**Why is *C difficile* such a problem now?**

**Can *C difficile* be treated?**

**Can my family and friends get *C difficile*?**

**What is the hospital doing to make sure I am safe?**

**What should I do at the hospital?**

**Why are special precautions or isolation needed?**

**What is *C difficile*?** *C difficile* is a bacteria (germ) that causes diarrhea and more serious intestinal conditions such as colitis. This bacteria can live in our intestines. There are many, many bacteria in the intestine that live there all the time (some even help us to digest food). Usually, the other bacteria compete with the *C difficile*, and don't let it multiply too much. When the other bacteria are disturbed by something like antibiotics (which kill both good and bad bacteria), then the *C difficile* takes advantage and start to multiply and can cause an infection. It is the most common cause of infectious diarrhea in the hospital.

**How do people get *C difficile*?** When someone is sick with *C difficile*, the bacteria leave their body with their stool (bowel movement), and can stay in the environment. *C difficile* bacteria can turn themselves into a special form (spore) that lives for a long time. Someone else can be infected if they ingest (eat) the spores. That can happen if their hands are contaminated with spores, and they touch their mouth. Contaminated hands can be the vehicle to bring the spores to another person.

**How do I know if I have *C difficile*?** Once someone has ingested the spore, it can live quietly with the other bacteria in their intestine. If the *C difficile* grows and multiplies, it can produce a toxin that can cause swelling in the intestine. That causes diarrhea and sometimes abdominal pain. In some cases it can be very severe. To find out if the diarrhea is caused by *C difficile*, your doctor will order a test that can identify the toxin.

**What are the symptoms of *C difficile* infection?** *C difficile* infection usually causes mild to moderate diarrhea, which may be accompanied by abdominal cramps and fever. In some cases, it can cause more severe diarrhea, and in rare cases, surgery is necessary because the intestine is so badly damaged. In extreme cases, *C difficile* infection can cause death.

**Who is at risk of getting an infection with *C difficile*?** People who have been on antibiotics and are at greater risk of developing an infection with *C difficile*, because these drugs disrupt the balance of bacteria in the intestine. As well, old age, other serious illnesses and poor overall health can increase the risk for more severe disease.

**Why is *C difficile* such a problem now?** *C difficile* has been identified as a concern in healthcare for more than 30 years, but recently a new strain was found that seems to be causing more problems. As a result, all hospitals have been looking at *C difficile* more closely than ever before.

**Can *C difficile* be treated?** Yes. Sometimes, stopping the antibiotics that you are taking can stop the *C difficile* infection, because the normal bacteria grow back and take control again. There are special antibiotics that are used to treat *C difficile* infection. Sometimes they have to be given for more than one course of treatment, but they are normally very effective in treating the infection.

**Can my family and friends get *C difficile*?** Healthy people who are not taking antibiotics are at very low risk of getting *C difficile* infection. To protect themselves against the small risk, they should wash their hands after visiting you, and follow the precautions that the staff explains to them. You may still have visitors when you have *C difficile*, but they must understand the importance of cleaning their hands when they leave your room. They must also wear gowns and gloves if they are caring for you, like the staff do, and they should not sit on the bed or on a commode chair.

**What is the hospital doing to make sure I am safe?** Looking closely at the *C difficile* cases is an important step in making sure you are safe. This is called surveillance, and it allows us to know whether there is a problem in the hospital and to understand how big the problem is. As well, we provide education to our staff about the risk of *C difficile* and the importance of hand washing to prevent spreading diseases. If there is a cluster of cases of *C difficile*, we ensure that our cleaning staff are involved in additional cleaning activities. Because we monitor the situation so closely, we can give the right medicine very early if it is needed to treat the infection.

**What should I do at the hospital?** Always wash your hands after using the bathroom and before eating. Remind others, including your doctors and nurses, to wash their hands before touching you. Cleaning hands is the best way for everyone to prevent spreading *C difficile* and other germs. If you have diarrhea that splashes on to the floor or another surface in your room, you must tell your nurse immediately, as it will need to be properly cleaned.

**Why are special precautions or isolation needed?** Patients who are sick with *C difficile* can spread the spores in their environment more easily than patients who are not sick. Since there are other sick patients in the hospital, and many patients who are getting antibiotics, there are lots of people at risk of having an infection if they get *C difficile*. We don't want the *C difficile* to spread to them. To help protect everyone, we use special precautions, including gowns and gloves and lots of hand washing when we care for someone who has *C difficile*. If you have diarrhea from *C difficile* in the hospital, you will be put on special precautions. This might mean that you have to move to a single room, or you might have a special commode or toilet to use while you are having diarrhea. Visitors who come to see you while you are on special precautions should not be visiting other patient rooms. We will ask you to stay in your room until your diarrhea stops. Once you stop having diarrhea for 2 days, these special precautions will be stopped.

## ***Clostridium difficile***

### **What should I do when I go home?**

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

#### **Hand Cleaning:**

Wash your hands for at least 15 seconds:

- after using the toilet,
- after touching dirty or contaminated surfaces,
- before eating or
- before preparing meals.

Also, remind other people in your home to wash their hands regularly. If your caregivers must handle feces or other body fluids, they should wear gloves and wash their hands when they take the gloves off.

**Cleaning the house:** An all-purpose, regular household cleaner can be used even if you have *C difficile*. Be sure to follow the instructions on the label and use good friction (rubbing) when cleaning a surface. Toilets and bathrooms need extra attention. If feces have splashed onto a surface, they must be removed first, and then cleaning done with the household cleaner. If it is possible, use your own bathroom until your diarrhea stops.

**Laundry:** If clothes are soiled with feces, they should be washed separately after rinsing off the feces. Hot water and soap are helpful to remove the bacteria, and drying clothes in a dryer is also helpful.

**Dishes:** Regular cleaning of dishes, either in a sink with soap and hot water or in a dishwasher is fine. You shouldn't share dishes or utensils.

**Medicine:** It is very important that you take all your medication as prescribed by your doctor. Do not use any drugs from the drugstore that will stop your diarrhea (e.g. Imodium®).

**Talk to your doctor:** If the diarrhea does not stop, or comes back, contact your doctor.

#### **For more information contact:**

Gwen Brown St. Francis Memorial Hospital (613) 756-3044 ext. 258