

# Clostridium difficile

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## Information for patients and visitors

This leaflet explains how we test for, treat and prevent infections with a bacterium (germ) called *Clostridium difficile* (*C. difficile*). If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to speak to the doctors or nurses caring for you.

## What is *Clostridium difficile*?

*Clostridium difficile* (*C. difficile* or *C.diff*) is a bacterium (germ) that lives in the gut of 3 - 8% of healthy adults and 66% of babies. It does not cause any problems in healthy people and rarely causes problems in babies.

But it can produce spores which are difficult to destroy and can survive outside the human body for a very long time.

## When does *C. difficile* become harmful?

- When you take antibiotics for bacterial infections, they can disturb the balance of the 'friendly' bacteria in your gut, allowing *C. difficile* to grow and produce a toxin (poison) which causes diarrhoea and other *C. difficile* infection (CDI) symptoms.
- If you have a CDI, you will have *C. difficile* spores in your faeces (poo). These spores can survive for a very long time outside your body and can be spread to other patients by members of staff and patient equipment.

## Who is most at risk of a *C. difficile* infection (CDI)?

People who:

- are 65 and over
- have a poor immune system
- are on antibiotics
- have repeated enemas and/or gut surgery.

## How is *C. difficile* spread?

It is spread by the spores produced by a CDI. These can be get on to healthcare workers' hands and patient equipment, including commodes, bedpans and toilets. If these spores are picked up by other patients and get into their guts, they may become infected with *C. difficile*.



## What are the symptoms of a CDI?

*C. difficile* can live in your gut without you having any symptoms.

If you have a CDI:

- you usually have frequent, mild to severe watery diarrhoea.
- you may also have a fever, lose your appetite, feel sick and have abdominal (tummy) pain
- rarely, you may develop a severe bowel inflammation (pseudomembranous colitis), which can occasionally become a life-threatening infection (megacolon).

If you are older over 65 or have many other illnesses your symptoms may be severe and you may take longer to get better.

You can have a CDI more than once. This is called recurrence.

## How do I know if I have a CDI?

We normally diagnose an infection by testing samples of your stools (poo) to see if there is any *C. difficile* in them. The tests show if there is an enzyme (GDH) that the bacterium produces, the *C. difficile* toxin or the *C. difficile* gene. Your doctor or nurse will explain the result to you.

## How is a CDI treated?

- If a test shows you have a CDI we will prescribe you antibiotics that are designed to kill *C. difficile*. Most patients make a full recovery.
- If you are taking antibiotics and antacids, your Doctor will check if these are still indicated and if necessary will stop any laxatives you are taking.
- If you have diarrhoea you should keep drinking plenty of fluids and eat enough food. We also check and make note of what



you eat and drink every day. If necessary, we will give you fluids through a drip or nutritional supplements such as special drinks.

## How does the hospital help prevent the spread of *C. difficile*?

- Staff will use soap and water to clean their hands rather than alcohol hand rub. This is because the hand rub does not kill *C. difficile* spores.
- Staff should always clean their hands before and after caring for a patient and when in contact with their environment, regardless of whether or not you have an infection, because it is an effective way of preventing the spread of any harmful bacteria.
- The cleaning contractor are instructed to terminally clean rooms where infected patients are being cared for as well as nurses cleaning the nursing and medical equipment. We use an efficacious disinfectant including chlorine to ensure all spores and bacteria are killed.

## What happens if I have a CDI?

If you have a CDI, we will take some extra precautions when caring for you.

You will be put into isolation and cared for either in a single room with its own toilet facilities/ commode that is for your use only, or in a room with other patients who also have a CDI.

- If you are in a single room, your door will be kept shut and it will have a notice on it telling staff to take special infection prevention and control precautions when they are looking after you.



## How can I help myself get better?

- If you have diarrhoea, drink plenty of fluids and keep eating as normally as possible, unless we have advised you otherwise.
- Regularly wash your hands every day with soap and water, especially after using the toilet or commode and before eating.
- If you are asked to use a specific toilet on the ward, please use this one only.
- Keep your bedside table or locker top as clear of things as possible, to make it easy for staff to clean these surfaces regularly.
- Keep food in sealed containers and store them in your bedside locker rather than on your bedside table.

## Do visitors need to take any special precautions?

Your family and friends are welcome to visit you but they must speak to the nurse in charge before going to your room if you have a CDI. To prevent the spread of *C. difficile* to other patients or elsewhere in the hospital, they must also wash their hands using soap and water before going into and as they leave your room.

They can encourage you to drink plenty and to continue to eat properly, but they should check with staff first. If you need help with eating or drinking, they must wash their hands again before helping you.

It is also helpful if your family and friends can take your soiled clothes home to wash because we cannot do this at the hospital. These should be carried in a plastic bag to avoid coming into contact with any surfaces and spreading infection. Machine wash them separately from other laundry on a cycle that reaches 60°C for at least 10 minutes using detergent washing powder.



## Do I need to take any special precautions after going home?

- No, but sometimes you can get diarrhoea again. If this happens, contact your GP and tell them you have recently been in hospital and had a *C. difficile* infection.

## Who can I contact with queries and concerns?

If you or your carers have any questions about your treatment or any information in this leaflet, please do not hesitate to ask one of the members of the nursing or medical staff on your ward.

You can also contact the Infection Prevention and Control teams at our hospital sites.

King's College Hospital, Denmark Hill

Tel: **020 3299 4374**

Email: **[kch-tr.KCH-IC-Nurses@nhs.uk](mailto:kch-tr.KCH-IC-Nurses@nhs.uk)**

Princess Royal University and Orpington hospitals,

Beckenham Beacon and Queen Mary's Hospital, Sidcup

Tel: **01689 863463**

Email: **[kch-tr.PRUHInfectionPreventionandControlNurses@nhs.net](mailto:kch-tr.PRUHInfectionPreventionandControlNurses@nhs.net)**



## Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) is a service that offers support, information and assistance to patients, relatives and visitors. They can also provide help and advice if you have a concern or complaint that staff have not been able to resolve for you.

**PALS at King's College Hospital**, Denmark Hill, London SE5 9RS:

Tel: **020 3299 3601**

Email: **kch-tr.PALS@nhs.net**

You can also contact us by using our online form at

**[www.kch.nhs.uk/contact/pals](http://www.kch.nhs.uk/contact/pals)**

**PALS at Princess Royal University Hospital**,

Farnborough Common, Orpington, Kent BR6 8ND

Tel: **01689 863252**

Email: **kch-tr.palskent@nhs.net**

**If you would like the information in this leaflet in a different language or format, please contact PALS on 020 3299 1844.**

## Further information

### NHS Choices

Visit the NHS Choices site for more information about MRSA

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



