

Clostridioides difficile (*C. difficile*)

Information for patients and visitors

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

What is *C. difficile*?

Clostridioides difficile (*C. difficile* or *C. diff*) is a germ that sometimes lives naturally in our gut without it causing any harm. It does not cause any problems in healthy people and rarely causes problems in babies.

However, it can produce spores which are difficult to destroy and can survive outside the human body for a long time. These can get onto healthcare workers' hands and patient equipment, including commodes, bedpans and toilets. If these spores are picked up by other patients and get into their gut, they can become infected with *C. difficile*.

When a person is healthy, the good bacteria in the gut keep the *C. difficile* under control. When a person is ill and needs to take antibiotics, the level of good bacteria is reduced. This allows *C. difficile* germs to grow quickly. As they multiply, they produce toxins A and B that may cause inflammation of the gut. This can lead to diarrhoea that can sometimes be severe.

Who is most at risk of getting a *C. difficile* infection?

People who:

- are over the age of 65
- are taking or have had antibiotics or other medications that alter the bacteria in the gut
- have an immune system that is not working properly
- have undergone gut surgery
- have inflammatory bowel disease

In most cases, the effects of an infection are relatively mild, but it can sometimes lead to serious illness.

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

C. difficile can live in your gut without any symptoms.

If you have an infection:

- you usually have frequent, mild to severe watery diarrhoea
- you may also have a fever, loss of appetite, feel sick and have abdominal (tummy) pain

- rarely, you may develop a severe gut inflammation (pseudomembranous colitis) which can become a life-threatening infection (megacolon).

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

You can have the infection more than once. This is called recurrence.

How do I know if I have a *C. difficile* infection?

We normally diagnose an infection by testing samples of your poo to see if there is any *C. difficile* toxin in them. If *C. difficile* is found in your poo, your doctor or nurse will explain the result to you.

How can the spread of *C. difficile* be prevented?

Isolation

If you test positive for *C. difficile* and have diarrhoea you will be moved to a single room to prevent *C. difficile* spreading to other people. We will provide you with your own commode (a chair with a hidden toilet) to use if your room is not en-suite.

The door of your single room will be kept shut and a notice will be placed on the door that tells staff which special infection prevention and control precautions to take when looking after you.

Hygiene

Good hygiene is especially important to prevent the spread of *C. difficile*. We will wear gloves and aprons when caring for you. We will also wash our hands with soap and water after coming into contact with you or your surroundings.

To prevent the spread of *C. difficile* you should:

- use soap and water to wash your hands (alcohol gel does not kill the *C. difficile* spores)
- always wash your hands with soap and water after using the toilet and before eating
- ask the nursing staff on the ward if you need help washing your hands (hand wipes are also available)
- make sure that visitors who come into contact with you or your surroundings wash their hands with soap and water before they leave the room

The cleaning contractors are instructed to take additional steps to increase cleaning of rooms where patients with infections are being cared for. Nurses also clean the nursing and medical equipment. We use a disinfectant that contains chlorine that is effective in killing spores and bacteria.

Visitors

Your family and friends can visit you in hospital, but we do not encourage children and babies to visit. People who are unwell themselves should not visit. If your visitor has had a recent infection or illness or has a medical problem which makes them vulnerable to infection, they should check with your doctor or nurse before visiting you.

Visitors should:

- wash their hands with soap and water before entering or leaving your room
- wear gloves and aprons if they help with your personal care during their visit (they must then put their gloves and aprons in an orange waste bin in the room, and wash their hands with soap and water afterwards)

It is also helpful if any family and friends can take your soiled clothes home to wash as 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 with detergent using the hot wash cycle of a domestic washing machine to a temperature of at least 80° Celsius.

How is *C. difficile* treated?

Depending on your symptoms, a course of antibiotics to reduce the levels of *C. difficile* in your gut will be prescribed. Treatment lasts around 10 days. Most patients make a full recovery.

If you are taking antibiotics or antacids, your doctor will check if these are still needed and, if necessary, will stop any laxatives you are taking. In addition, any anti-diarrhoeals should be stopped as they are dangerous to give when someone has *C. difficile* infection.

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 can I help myself get better?

Regularly wash your hands with soap and water, especially after using the toilet or commode and before eating. If you are bed bound, ask a nurse or assistant for moist hand wipes that you can use to clean your hands.

Only use the toilet allocated for your use.

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 I need to take any special precautions after going home?

If you still have some diarrhoea when you go home, keep taking your treatment and drink plenty of fluids. Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water after you go to the toilet and use a separate towel. Try to keep the toilet flushed and the toilet lid, rim and handle clean.

C. difficile is usually very low risk to family and friends if they are in reasonably good health and not on antibiotics. Family should wash their hands after going to the toilet and before eating. This helps prevent the spread of *C. difficile*. It is always recommended that people wash their hands every time they use the toilet.

It is not uncommon for patients to have some disruption to their normal bowel habit after *C. difficile* infection. This normally settles over time, however if you notice your symptoms are worsening please seek advice from your doctor as the infection can recur.

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 Team at our hospital sites:

King's College Hospital, Denmark Hill

Tel: **020 3299 8173**

Email: **kch-tr.KCH-IC-Nurse@nhs.net**

Princess Royal University Hospital, Orpington Hospital, Beckenham Beacon and Queen Mary's Hospital, Sidcup.

Tel: **01689 863459**

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

MyChart

Our MyChart app and website lets you securely access parts of your health record with us, giving you more control over your care. To sign up or for help, call us on 020 3299 4618 or email kings.mychart@nhs.net. Visit www.kch.nhs.uk/mychart to find out more.

Sharing your information

King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust has partnered with Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust through the King's Health Partners Academic Health Sciences Centre. We are working together to give our patients the best possible care, so you might find we invite you for appointments at Guy's or St Thomas' hospitals. King's College Hospital and Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trusts share an electronic patient record system, which means information about your health record can be accessed safely and securely by health and care staff at both Trusts. For more information visit www.kch.nhs.uk.

Care provided by students

We provide clinical training where our students get practical experience by treating patients. Please tell your doctor or nurse if you do not want students to be involved in your care. Your treatment will not be affected by your decision.

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. They can also pass on praise or thanks to our teams.

Tel: **020 3299 4618**

Email: **kings.pals@nhs.net**

If you would like the information in this leaflet in a different language or format, please contact our Interpreting and Accessible Communication Support on 020 3299 4618 or email kings.access@nhs.net