

FOR MORE INFORMATION about
Clostridium difficile, visit www.cdc.gov.

A Patient's Guide

UNDERSTANDING
*Clostridium
difficile*

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Clostridium difficile

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1. What is *Clostridium difficile* (*C. difficile*)?

C. difficile is a bacterium that is found in the intestines. It most commonly causes mild to moderate diarrhea. Sometimes it can cause more serious infection of the intestines, called colitis. In rare cases, infection with *C. difficile* can lead to death.

2. How does *C. difficile* cause disease?

C. difficile bacteria can be found in the intestines of healthy people. It is usually kept in check by other normal bacteria. When a person takes an antibiotic, some of the normal bacteria die and *C. difficile* bacteria can multiply. When *C. difficile* bacteria multiply, some are capable of producing toxins that cause diarrhea or inflammation of the colon.

3. What are the symptoms of *C. difficile* disease?

The most common symptom of *C. difficile* disease is watery diarrhea, consisting of 3 or more bowel movements per day for 2 or more days. Other common symptoms include fever, loss of appetite, nausea, and abdominal cramping or tenderness.

4. Who is at risk for developing *C. difficile* disease?

Antibiotic use is the most important risk factor for developing *C. difficile* disease. Other important risk factors include hospitalization, a stay in a nursing home, advanced age, a serious underlying illness, a weakened immune system, or gastrointestinal surgery.

5. How is *C. difficile* disease treated?

If you develop *C. difficile* disease as a result of antibiotic use, your doctor may instruct you to stop taking that antibiotic if possible. In addition, your doctor may prescribe oral metronidazole or oral vancomycin capsules to treat your *C. difficile* disease. In very severe cases, intravenous medications or surgery may be required.

6. How is *C. difficile* spread?

C. difficile is found in feces and has the ability to form spores. People can become infected when they touch items that are contaminated with feces and then touch their mouth. In the hospital, *C. difficile* can be spread between patients on the hands of healthcare workers.

It is important to note that *C. difficile* bacteria produce spores that can live on surfaces for months. In the hospital, spores can be transferred to anyone who comes into contact with contaminated items (such as bedrails and commodes) or medical devices (such as blood pressure cuffs and thermometers). If the spores are ingested, *C. difficile* disease may occur.

7. How can I prevent spreading *C. difficile* to my family members and friends?

It is rare for healthy people who are not taking antibiotics to get *C. difficile* disease. However, you can still spread the bacteria to others – particularly if you have diarrhea.

Especially after using the bathroom and before eating, wash your hands with soap and

water. It may help to prevent the spread of *C. difficile* if you clean your kitchen and bathrooms daily with a mixture of bleach and water. The mixture should include 1 part bleach to every 10 parts water; so, for example, if you are using a cup, mix 1 cup of bleach with 10 cups of water. This mixture can be used to clean the surfaces in your kitchen (for example, countertops and cutting boards) and bathrooms (for example, toilet seats, toilet bowl, flush handle and sink faucet handles). Mix only the amount of bleach and water that you will need to clean your kitchen and bathrooms once, and pour the rest down the drain. If you have diarrhea, try to avoid using the same toilet that your family members use unless the toilet can be cleaned with the bleach and water mixture after each use.

8. What symptoms should I be concerned about during or after treatment for *C. difficile* disease?

You should seek medical advice immediately if you develop a fever, chills, vomiting, abdominal pain, diarrhea, or any other concerning symptoms.