

Information for patients

December 2010

***Clostridium difficile* infection**

***Clostridium difficile* is a common bacteria that can, under certain circumstances, cause diarrhoea. The bacteria is spread from person to person, often via hands or contaminated surfaces. Careful use of antibiotics and good hygiene can help to prevent spread**

What is *Clostridium difficile*?

Clostridium difficile (*C. difficile*) is bacteria which is present naturally in the bowel of many healthy children under 2 years and is the most common cause of antibiotic associated diarrhoea in adults.

C. difficile can also be found in the environment and in healthcare facilities where there are a high number of sick and elderly patients.

In many cases *C. difficile* diarrhoea is mild and will only last a few days, stopping without any treatment. In very severe cases, a *C. difficile* infection can result in a dangerous inflammation of the colon.

Those who have illnesses or those with conditions that require prolonged use of antibiotics as well as the elderly can be at greater risk of this type of bacteria causing an infection.

What is different about the 027 strain of *C. difficile*?

Some strains such as the 027 strain of *C. difficile* can survive for longer periods in the environment than other types of *C. difficile*. It is also more resistant to some antibiotics than many other strains of *C. difficile*. Although the 027 strain has been found overseas for some years, it has only recently been detected in Australia. Regardless of the strain of *C. difficile* the precautions adopted and the recommended treatment are the same.

Who is at risk of *C. difficile* infection?

Most healthy people with *C. difficile* in their bowel remain completely well and show no unusual signs of infection.

Antibiotic treatment can sometimes inhibit some normal bacteria and allow the *C. difficile* to grow and this can sometimes cause disease.

Elderly people, people living in residential aged care facilities and people with chronic health problems are more likely to develop *C. difficile* infection than other people.

How do I know if I am infected with *C. difficile*?

The symptoms of *C. difficile* infection include

- Watery diarrhoea
- Fever
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Abdominal pain or tenderness

A sample of your faeces will be taken and sent to a laboratory to see if you are infected with *C. difficile*.

What treatment will I receive for *C. difficile* infection?

In many cases the infection is mild and will only last a few days. Diarrhoea often stops without any treatment for *C. difficile*.

In some cases diarrhoea can last for several weeks. In some cases it may be necessary to treat the infection with different antibiotics to kill the *C. difficile* bacteria.

In very severe cases, a *C. difficile* infection can result in a dangerous inflammation of the colon.

How does *C. difficile* spread?

Like any bacteria that cause diarrhoea, *C. difficile* is spread by the faeces of someone with *C. difficile* even though they may be well.

C. difficile can be spread via the hands of people when they come into contact with faeces, skin or other surfaces in their environment, that are contaminated with faecal bacteria from people infected with *C. difficile* and then touch their mouth or nose. *C. difficile* spores can survive for a long time in the environment, on any surface, in toilet areas and on clothing, sheets, towels and furniture.

How will I be treated if I have *C. difficile* infection while I am in hospital?

You may be placed in a single room or be given your own toilet or commode to prevent the infection spreading to other patients, visitors and healthcare staff.

Healthcare staff will wear gloves and aprons when caring for you to prevent cross infection with other patients. These precautions will continue until 48 hours after the last diarrhoea.

What can hospitals do to help prevent spread of *C. difficile* infections?

When possible patients with *C. difficile* infection will be put in a single room or cared for in certain areas of the hospital.

Healthcare staff will wash their hands with soap and water or alcohol based hand rubs based on the care they are providing, including before putting on and after taking off their gloves and aprons.

Areas prone to being contaminated with *C. difficile*, such as bathrooms and toilets, will be thoroughly cleaned as well as being disinfected with chlorine based disinfectants.

What do you tell your family and friends who visit you in hospital?

Healthy people are not usually at risk of getting *C. difficile* and can safely visit you. If your visitors are unsure they should check with the Nursing/Midwifery Unit Manager for your ward.

Your visitors should follow the advice of the nurses/midwives on your ward and

- Wash their hands with soap and water or alcohol based hand rubs when entering and leaving ward areas
- Not eat at your bedside or sit on your bed
- Avoid visiting you if they are feeling unwell or have recently had diarrhoea.

What should I do when I go home to prevent the spread of *C.difficile* to family and friends?

- Normal good hygiene practices are important.
- Wash your hands with soap and water, especially after using the toilet and before eating or preparing food.
- The use of liquid pump dispenser soap for handwashing is recommended.
- If you develop diarrhoea you should not prepare food for others, share household items such as towels.
- Regularly clean surfaces in bathrooms, particularly the toilet bowl and toilet seat, and surfaces in kitchens with household detergents or disinfectants. Carefully follow instructions on the label when using disinfectants such as household bleach.
- Thoroughly wash clothing, sheets and towels that may be soiled with faecal matter. These should be kept separate from the rest of the household washing. Remember to wash your hands with soap and water after handling soiled items.

Should I tell anyone that I have had *C. difficile* infection?

- Tell your local doctor you have had a *C.difficile* infection so that careful consideration can be given to any future antibiotic use.
- If you have to go to hospital or attend a clinic or doctor's surgery make sure you let staff know in advance.
- Advise any other health professional (such as your dentist).

Can *C. difficile* infection come back?

It is possible that the infection and associated symptoms may return up to three months following treatment.

Contact your local doctor immediately if you develop any further diarrhoea.