

## ***Clostridium difficile***

### **Patient Information Leaflet**

### **June 2014**

#### **What is *Clostridium difficile*?**

- *Clostridium difficile*, also known as 'C. difficile' and 'C. diff' is a bacteria (germ) that normally lives in your large intestine (gut/bowel).
- *Clostridium difficile* is usually found in the large intestine (bowel). A small proportion (less than 1 in 20) of the healthy adult population carry a small amount of *Clostridium difficile* and don't experience any problem with it. It is kept in check by the normal, 'good' bacteria of the intestine.
- However, when you take an antibiotic, some of the 'good' bacteria die causing the *Clostridium difficile* bacteria to multiply and you may get an infection in your large intestine.

#### **What are the symptoms of *Clostridium difficile*?**

- If you become infected with *Clostridium difficile* you may get diarrhoea, which has a very unpleasant smell.
- You may also suffer from stomach cramps, fever, nausea and loss of appetite.
- Most people only get mildly ill and recover fully from it.
- However, in certain circumstances you may get seriously ill and develop colitis (inflammation of the bowel). If the colitis is severe it can be life threatening.

#### **How is *Clostridium difficile* diagnosed?**

- A sample of diarrhoea is sent to the laboratory for testing. Staff in the laboratory test for *Clostridium difficile* bacteria in the diarrhoea.

#### **Is *Clostridium difficile* contagious?**

- Yes, it is. If you have *Clostridium difficile* diarrhoea, the *Clostridium difficile* bacteria can survive on your hands and surfaces for a long time. It can then pass from your hands and surfaces to others through unwashed hands and soiled equipment.
- To prevent the *Clostridium difficile* from spreading, you, your family members and hospital staff need to regularly wash your hands and clean and disinfect equipment.

If you don't have diarrhoea, *Clostridium difficile* cannot be spread to other people.

### **Who is most likely to get *Clostridium difficile* diarrhoea?**

You are most at risk of developing infection if you:

- Are taking or have recently finished taking antibiotics.
- Have spent a long time in hospital or other healthcare settings (e.g., nursing homes).
- Are older.
- Have a serious illness.
- Have a weakened immunity (e.g., receiving cancer treatment).
- Have had bowel surgery.

### **What treatment will I get if I have *Clostridium difficile* diarrhoea?**

- In some cases, certain antibiotics may have caused the diarrhoea so you may have to stop taking them.
- You may be given other antibiotics which are effective against the *Clostridium difficile* bacteria.
- It is important to drink enough fluids so that you don't become dehydrated because of the diarrhoea.

### **What happens if I have *Clostridium difficile* diarrhoea while I'm in hospital?**

- You will be moved to a single room or special ward and given a toilet or commode for your own use.
- You must make sure to wash your hands with soap and water after using the toilet and before meals.
- Staff looking after you will wear aprons and gloves and wash their hands after caring for you.

### **Can I have visitors if I am infected with *Clostridium difficile*?**

- Yes, you can have visitors as healthy people are at very little risk of getting *Clostridium difficile* unless they are taking antibiotics. If you have any concerns about someone visiting, please seek advice from nursing staff first.
- Your visitors will be asked to report to the nurse in charge before visiting you.
- Ask your visitors to wash their hands with soap and water after visiting you.
- Your visitors will need to wear gloves and aprons if they are helping with your personal care.
- Your visitors should sit on the chairs provided, not on your bed and only use the public toilets.

**Will any of my treatment be delayed because I have *Clostridium difficile* diarrhoea?**

- Your tests or treatment should continue as planned, with staff taking the correct precautions to prevent *Clostridium difficile* spreading.
- Some non-urgent tests may be delayed if you have severe diarrhoea.

**How will I know when the *Clostridium difficile* is no longer infectious?**

- Once the diarrhoea has stopped for at least 48 hours and your bowel motion is back to normal you are on the mend.
- However, *Clostridium difficile* bacteria may remain in your bowel for sometime afterwards and the diarrhoea may return requiring further treatment.

**Can I go home with *Clostridium difficile* diarrhoea?**

- You should normally wait until the diarrhoea has settled and your doctor is satisfied that you are fit to go home. Your doctor will let you know if you need to continue treatment at home.

**Can *Clostridium difficile* diarrhoea come back?**

- Yes, some patients may suffer a relapse of diarrhoea. Please contact your GP/family doctor if you develop diarrhoea after you are discharged from hospital and let him know that you had *Clostridium difficile* recently. If you need antibiotics for another illness please tell your GP/family doctor that you recently had *Clostridium difficile*.

**If I have *Clostridium difficile* diarrhoea at home how do I stop my family from catching it?**

To reduce the risk of spreading *Clostridium difficile* to others, take the following steps:

- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water and dry them after using the bathroom and before eating.
- Be strict with your personal hygiene – do not share personal items such as towels and face cloths.
- Machine wash soiled laundry separately from other washing on the hottest wash cycle suitable for linen and clothing.
- Tell your family or carers to wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water and dry them after caring for you.
- Try to avoid using the same toilet that your family members use. If this is not possible, ensure that the toilet is cleaned and disinfected after your use.
- Clean surfaces in bathrooms on a regular basis with household detergents. If you have had diarrhoea, then disinfect with a mixture of bleach and water as instructed on the container. Pay special attention to sink taps, flush handle, toilet seats and lastly the toilet bowl.

## How to wash your hand properly

1. Wet your hands under running water
2. Lather with soap
3. Cover all parts of you hands
4. Rinse well under running water
5. Dry thoroughly

It should take around 30 seconds to wash your hands properly.

## Further information

[www.hse.ie](http://www.hse.ie)

[www.hse.ie/go/antibiotics](http://www.hse.ie/go/antibiotics)

[www.hse.ie/handhygiene](http://www.hse.ie/handhygiene)

[www.hpsc.ie](http://www.hpsc.ie) Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) (Go into the Topics A-Z section of the site and then click *Clostridium difficile*)

[www.health.gov.ie/patient-safety/ncec](http://www.health.gov.ie/patient-safety/ncec) National Clinical Guideline No. 3 (Surveillance, Diagnosis and Management of *Clostridium difficile* Infection in Ireland) (June, 2014)

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