

Prevent and Manage Infections Safely: C. difficile

This fact sheet is about a kind of germ called C.difficile that causes infections. Avoiding these infections is a key part of quality care.

Nursing homes working on this goal are trying to cut down on infections. Infections are caused by germs, like bacteria and viruses. Germs often spread from person to person. The first focus of this goal is to reduce C.difficile infections. But the same methods can also help stop the spread of other germs in a nursing home.

What is C. difficile?

Clostridium difficile [klo-strid-ee-um dif-uh-seel], also known as “C. diff” [See-dif], are bacteria that cause serious infections of the lower intestines, mainly the colon. When a person has a C. diff infection, the bacteria are in their bowel movements (also known as “feces”). People can become infected if they touch something with feces on it and then touch the wet linings of their own mouth or nose (also called “mucous membranes”).

How would you know if you are infected with C. diff?

The most common sign of C. diff infection is diarrhea, or loose stools. You may lose your appetite, get nausea, or have stomach pain. You may have a fever. You may carry C. diff but not show signs. This is why it is important to use safe practices, such as washing your hands often.

Who is at risk for getting an infection from C. diff?

Not everyone who comes into contact with the C. diff germ will become sick. If you are healthy and practice safety precautions, you are not likely to become ill from C.diff. This is true even if you are with someone who is infected. Recent antibiotic use raises a person’s risk of getting C. diff. So, if you need antibiotics to treat an illness, you can be at higher risk for C. diff infection. Older adults, especially those who are frail, are also at more risk for C. diff infections. Infections in older adults can also be worse than in younger people.

Why are older adults at greater risk for C. diff?

As you get older, your body is less able to fight infections. The infection fighting system, (also known as the “immune system”), starts to change and weaken. This is especially true for people over age 65. You may also have medical conditions and illnesses which make it harder for your body to fight infection.

How do antibiotics raise your risk for C. diff — don’t they kill bacteria?

Antibiotics do kill harmful bacteria that cause infections. But these same drugs can also kill helpful bacteria. These are bacteria that are supposed to live on your skin and in your bodies (also known as “colonization”). Some of them live in your lower intestines. They help you break down food. They also protect you from harmful germs, like C. diff. When an antibiotic kills off those helpful bacteria, C. diff germs are able to stay in your lower intestines and make you ill.

How is C. diff spread?

When a person is ill with C. diff and has diarrhea, lots of the bacteria can be shed in their feces. If their skin, clothes or things around them (for example, bed side tables or door knobs) get dirty or “contaminated” with their feces, then the bacteria will be able to stick. Cleaning may not remove all C. diff germs. C. diff germs are very sticky. They are hard to kill and can’t be seen. A person caring for someone who is ill with C. diff can get the germ on his/her hands. The hands of staff or visitors can become contaminated. Then they can spread C. diff to other people they visit. Any equipment (for example, commodes) or devices (for example, blood pressure cuff) used to care for someone actively ill with C. diff can also become contaminated.

What can the nursing home do to avoid the spread of C. diff?

There are a number of things a nursing home can do to avoid spreading C.diff:

- Quickly notice signs of C. diff infections.
- Use gowns, gloves, and separate equipment to care for someone with C. diff infection. This limits the contamination of hands and surfaces.
- Teach everyone in the nursing home about how and when to do good hand cleaning. This can be with alcohol-based hand rubs or soap and water.
- Use products that kill C. diff germs when cleaning and disinfecting in rooms of people with C. diff infection.
- Be very careful about when and how antibiotics are used for everyone in the nursing home.

What can you do to avoid the spread of C. diff?

- Tell your caregiver if you have new or worsening diarrhea or stomach pain.
- Try to use a separate toilet if you have diarrhea. If you share a toilet with someone with diarrhea, be sure the bathroom is cleaned well before you or others use it. • Always wash your hands after going to the bathroom.
- Remind your caregiver to clean hands before caring for you or other people.
- Ask your visitors to clean hands before and after they visit.
- Always take antibiotics as prescribed by a doctor, but ask questions to understand why the antibiotic is being used. Ask if there are other choices. Remember, the more antibiotics you take, the more at risk you are for C. diff infections.