

C. Difficile

Clostridium difficile

Just the Facts



What is C. difficile?

C. difficile is a spore bacterium that is naturally found in the feces (stool).

What is C. difficile disease?

Good bacteria kill C. difficile in the bowel. When certain antibiotics are used for illnesses the good bacteria can be killed as well. When the good bacteria are killed C. difficile is able to grow and produce toxins. The toxins can damage the bowel and cause diarrhea. C. difficile disease is usually mild but it can cause serious illness. In severe cases surgery may be needed. Death can occur in extreme cases of C. difficile disease. C. difficile is the most common cause of infectious diarrhea in hospitals and long-term care facilities.

What are the symptoms of C. difficile disease?

- Watery diarrhea, more than 3 bowel movements in a 24 hour period, or anything that is unusual for that particular person
- Fever
- Abdominal pain or tenderness
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea

Who gets C. difficile disease?

C. difficile usually occurs after antibiotic use. The elderly, those who are immunocompromised, anyone undergoing chemotherapy, and those who have other serious illnesses are at increased risk. A lengthy stay in a healthcare setting and bowel surgery can also increase the risk of C. difficile disease.

How is C. difficile disease diagnosed?

If you have symptoms of C. difficile a sample will be taken of the watery stool. A laboratory test will be performed to see if C. difficile toxins are present.

What is the treatment for C. difficile disease?

Treatment depends on how sick you are. People with mild symptoms may not need any treatment other than drinking plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration and a fever reducer containing acetaminophen. For more severe disease antibiotics designed to kill C. difficile are required. It is very important to take all medication as prescribed by your doctor. Never use over-the-counter medication to stop the diarrhea. This can make the illness worse. Contact your doctor if diarrhea does not go away or comes back.

How does C. difficile spread?

Surfaces such as: toilets, doorknobs and handles, bedpans, and shared commode chairs can become contaminated with C. difficile bacteria. This bacterium is not seen with the naked eye but our hands can become infected by touching one of these surfaces. If we touch our mouth without washing our hands, we can become infected. Our soiled hands can also spread the bacterium to other surfaces or people.

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Preventing the spread of *C. difficile* in a healthcare setting

1. Wash your hands regularly for 20 seconds with soap and warm water.
2. Wash your hands often if you work in, or are visiting someone in a long-term care facility or hospital, especially after using the toilet.
3. Use hand sanitizers at the entrance of hospitals and long-term care facilities when available.
4. Patients in hospital who are infected with *C. difficile* disease may be restricted to their room.
5. All staff entering a *C. difficile* patient's room should wear a gown and gloves.
6. The surfaces and equipment in a *C. difficile* patient's room should be cleaned thoroughly.

Preventing the spread at home

Healthy people who are not taking antibiotics are at very low risk for *C. difficile* disease. Certain hygiene practices should be followed to prevent the spread of any illness:

1. Wash your hands after using the toilet or touching dirty surfaces and before preparing meals or eating.
2. Clean your house with an all-purpose household cleaner. Follow directions on the label.
3. Wet surfaces with cleaner, scrub well and let air dry.
4. When cleaning, pay special attention to areas that may be soiled with feces such as the toilet and sink. Remove visible feces and clean as described above.
5. Wash clothes and other fabrics separately if they are heavily soiled with feces. Rinse off feces, clean in hot water with soap, and dry in the dryer on high heat if possible. Dry clean when appropriate to do so.
6. Clean dishes in the dishwasher or sink. If washing dishes in the dishwasher, no extra disinfection is needed. When using the sink, wash dishes with soap and hot water. Then rinse dishes in another sink using a bleach solution of 5 mls (1 teaspoon) of bleach per 495 mls (2 cups) of water. Let dishes air dry. Do not wipe with a towel.

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