



Living with **C. DIFF**

Learning how to control the spread of
Clostridium difficile (C. diff)

IMPORTANT

C. diff can be a serious condition. If you or someone in your family has been diagnosed with C. diff, there are steps you can take **now** to avoid spreading it to your family and friends.

This booklet was developed to help you understand and manage C. diff. Follow the recommendations and practice good hygiene to take care of yourself. C. diff may cause physical pain and emotional stress, but keep in mind that it can be treated. For more information on your C. diff infection, please contact your health care provider.

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

Clostridium difficile (pronounced Klo-STRID-ee-um dif-uh-SEEL) is also known as C. diff, C. difficile, Clostridium difficile-associated disease (CDAD) and Clostridium difficile infection (CDI). These are all terms used to describe a condition caused by a bacterium (germ) found in the intestines (bowels) and stool (bowel movement) of some people and animals. Your body normally has different kinds of bacteria, many of which help do something important in the bowel. Some bacteria that we carry may, at times, cause illness — including C. diff.

The most common symptoms of C. diff infection are:

- Watery diarrhea, mild to severe.
- Belly pain and tenderness.
- Fever, often high in severe cases.

In severe cases, C. diff may cause parts of the bowel to die or become nonfunctional, and surgery may be needed to remove those parts. In extreme cases, C. diff may lead to death. C. diff is the most common cause of infectious diarrhea in hospitals and long-term care facilities (nursing homes).

There are two types of C. diff conditions:

1. You can have an active infection. An active infection means that you are having symptoms (diarrhea, cramps, etc.). Symptoms can range from mild to severe.
2. You can be “colonized.” People who are colonized have the bacteria in their bowels but it is not causing any symptoms.

What causes a C. diff infection?

Antibiotic use is the most common cause of C. diff. Antibiotics work by killing off bacteria, but antibiotics cannot tell the difference between various kinds of bacteria, or good and bad bacteria. When antibiotics kill off the “good” bacteria in your intestines, the C. diff bacteria have an opportunity to multiply and cause illness. Some other conditions that can increase the risk of C. diff infection are:

- Bowel surgery.
- A weakened immune system.
- Serious underlying illness such as cancer, liver and kidney disease.
- Old age.

Who is most at risk to get C. diff?

The elderly, people with certain medical problems, and those with weak immune systems have the greatest chance of getting C. diff. Also, people who take certain antibiotics or those with frequent admissions to health care facilities may be at a higher risk.

How do I know if I have C. diff infection?

If your doctor thinks you might have C. diff, he or she will take a sample of your stool and have it tested by the laboratory to see if the C. diff bacteria can be detected. In most cases, doctors will not test you for C. diff if you do not have diarrhea. There are many causes and reasons for diarrhea. Not everyone who has diarrhea has C. diff.

How does C. diff spread from one person to another?

C. diff is spread when people do not wash their hands properly after using the bathroom and then touch an object that comes into contact with the mouth of another person. Health care workers (doctors, nurses and others) can sometimes spread C. diff from one patient to another if they don't wash their hands thoroughly in between caring for patients. If you do not see your health care providers wash their hands, please ask them to do so.

C. diff bacteria can also be found on items in the hospital or nursing home. Most commonly, surfaces such as toilets, bed pans, commode chairs, and bed rails may be contaminated. C. diff bacteria have the ability to form "spores" that can survive for many weeks on surfaces. If these surfaces are not properly cleaned, spores can be transferred to anyone who comes in contact with the surface.

What if I have C. diff while I am in a health care facility?

You may be placed on "special precautions" until you no longer have diarrhea. During the time you are on these special precautions, your activities outside the room may be restricted. Health care staff and visitors will need to wash their hands with soap and water and put on gowns and gloves before entering your hospital room. Before exiting your hospital room, health care staff and visitors MUST remove gowns and gloves and wash hands with soap and water. Washing hands with soap and water is the most important way for everyone to prevent the spread of C. diff. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers are not as effective at removing C. diff spores as soap and water. These special precautions will help prevent the spread of the bacteria to other patients, health care workers and family members.

If I get C. diff, will I always have it?

If you are diagnosed with C. diff, it is unknown if you will clear or get rid of all C. diff bacteria in your bowel. People can be colonized with C. diff in their bowel without it causing an infection. Sometimes colonized people can have a reactivation of a C. diff infection.

It is important to note that if you are not having symptoms of C. diff infection, you do not need to be tested for C. diff. If you get symptoms again, see your health care provider. At that time he/she may wish to test you again.

How is C. diff treated?

Treatment is different from person to person depending on how sick you are. People with mild symptoms may not need treatment. If you get a C. diff infection from antibiotic use, your doctor may tell you to stop taking the antibiotic, and this may be all that is needed to stop the symptoms. Sometimes, based on your symptoms and other things such as age and health conditions, your doctor will give you stronger antibiotics to treat the C. diff infection. In severe cases, surgery may be needed to help you get better (surgery is needed for only 1 or 2 out of every 100 people). Your doctor will determine the best treatment plan for you.

If you are given a prescription to treat C. diff, take the medicine exactly as directed by your doctor or pharmacist. You should not use any medicine from the drugstore that will stop your diarrhea, such as Pepto-Bismol or Imodium, unless your health care provider specifically asks you to do so. If your diarrhea does not go away or comes back, or if you get fever, chills, or pain in your belly, you should contact your doctor.

How can the spread of C. diff be prevented in health care facilities?

Doctors, nurses, and other health care professionals should:

- Wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water before and after caring for every patient. This will prevent C. diff from being passed from patient to patient. Please ask your doctors, nurses and other health care workers to wash their hands before they care for you.
- Put on gloves and wear a gown over their clothing when caring for a patient with C. diff.
- Remove their gown and gloves and wash their hands before leaving the room of a patient with C. diff.
- Make sure that patient rooms and medical equipment are carefully and thoroughly cleaned before being used by other patients.

What patients and visitors can do to prevent spread:

- Patients and visitors should wash their hands often with soap and water, especially after using the bathroom and before eating.
- As recommended by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), patients with C. diff should stay in their rooms and follow special precautions.
- Patients with C. diff should avoid going to “common” areas of the facility such as the cafeteria and gift shop. You may be asked to shower and/or change to a fresh, clean gown before leaving your room to go into other areas of the hospital.
- Visitors should check in with the nurse’s station prior to entering the patient’s room, follow the nurse’s instructions, and always wash their hands before entering the room and before leaving the room.

How can I prevent spreading C. diff (and other germs) to others at home?

- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after using the bathroom, before preparing food and before eating.
- For drying your hands, use cloth towels only once, or use disposable towels.
- Wear disposable gloves if you expect to come into contact with stool, urine and wound drainage. Wash your hands after removing gloves.
- Frequently clean areas of your home, such as your bathroom, that may become contaminated with C. diff.
- Change and wash linens on a regular basis, or any time they are soiled.
- Notify health care providers if you are infected or colonized with C. diff.

What is good hand hygiene?

Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds (or two verses of the “Happy Birthday” song) with soap and water:

- After using the toilet or helping someone use the toilet.
- After touching dirty surfaces and handling soiled laundry.
- After handling items soiled by body fluids.
- Before and after preparing meals/snacks.
- Before eating meals.
- Before and after taking or giving medications.
- After caring for a sick person.
- After touching pets.
- After sneezing, coughing, or blowing your nose.
- Any time hands are visibly dirty.

What is the proper way to wash my hands?

- Wet your hands with warm, running water.
- Add soap and rub hands together, front and back including wrists and between fingers for 20 seconds. Clean under fingernails.
- Rinse the soap from your hands.
- Dry your hands with a clean towel.
- Soap and water may be the best choice for patients with *C. diff* infection and health care workers caring for them. But, as an alternative when hands are not visibly soiled, use an alcohol based hand sanitizer. Follow the directions on the label.

What is the proper way to clean?

People without diarrhea are much less likely to spread germs into the environment. However, if diarrhea occurs, use a bleach-containing cleaner for the bathroom and high-touch areas. If using bleach alone, then follow the directions on the label – generally one part bleach to ten parts water (1:10 solution) made fresh daily. Never mix bleach with other cleaners.

- Wet the surface well and clean vigorously.
- Allow the surface to air dry.
- Pay special attention to areas that may be soiled with stool, such as the toilet (don't forget the flush handle), sink, and areas that are touched frequently, such as door knobs and light switches.

What is the proper way to wash clothes and other fabrics?

Wash clothes/fabrics separately if they are heavily soiled with stool:

- Rinse off stool into the toilet.
- Use the hot water cycle with soap; use bleach when fabric appropriate.
- Dry items in the dryer on high heat, if possible.

What is the proper way to clean dishes?

For regular cleaning, use of the dishwasher or hand washing with soap and water is very effective. Some people may prefer to final-rinse their dishes and utensils in a diluted bleach solution of one tablespoon bleach in one gallon of water, and allow them to air dry.

Shopping List

These items can be found at most drug stores or grocery stores:

- Disposable gloves
- Tissues
- Soap
- Disinfectant
- Bleach
- Plastic trash bags
- Alcohol-based hand sanitizer

Things to remember about living with C. diff:

1. Wash your hands often, especially after using the bathroom and before preparing food.
2. Wear gloves if your hands may come in contact with body fluids or stool.
3. Frequently clean areas of the home, especially your bathrooms, that may have been contaminated with C. diff.
4. Inform all your health care providers if you have been diagnosed with C. diff so they may take the appropriate precautions when caring for you.
5. Talk to your health care provider if you have any questions.

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