

Clostridium difficile

***Clostridium difficile*, also known as *C. difficile* or “C. diff”, is bacteria that can infect the bowel and cause diarrhoea.**

The infection most commonly affects people who have recently been treated with antibiotics. It can spread easily to others.

C. difficile infections are unpleasant and can sometimes cause serious bowel problems, but they can usually be treated with another course of antibiotics.

Symptoms of a *C. difficile* infection

Symptoms of a *C. difficile* infection usually develop when you're taking antibiotics, or when you have finished taking them within the last few weeks.

The most common symptoms are:

- diarrhoea several times a day
- fever
- loss of appetite
- feeling sick
- tummy pain

In some cases, you may have signs of dehydration.

How you get *C. difficile*

C. difficile bacteria are found in the digestive system of about 1 in every 30 healthy adults.

The bacteria often live harmlessly because other bacteria normally found in the bowel keep it under control.

But some antibiotics can interfere with the balance of bacteria in the bowel, which can cause the *C. difficile* bacteria to multiply and produce toxins that make the person ill.

When this happens, *C. difficile* can spread easily to other people because the bacteria are passed out of the body in the person's diarrhoea.

Once out of the body, the bacteria turn into resistant cells called spores.

These can survive for long periods on hands, surfaces (such as toilets), objects and clothing unless they're thoroughly cleaned, and can infect someone else if they get into their mouth.

Someone with a *C. difficile* infection is generally considered to be infectious until at least 48 hours after their symptoms have cleared up.

How to stop *C. difficile* spreading

C. difficile infections can be passed on very easily.

You can reduce your risk of picking it up or spreading it by practicing good hygiene, both at home and in healthcare settings.

The following measures can help:

- stay at home until at least 48 hours after your symptoms have cleared up
- wash your hands regularly with soap and water, particularly after going to the toilet and before eating – use liquid rather than bar soap
- clean contaminated surfaces (such as the toilet, flush handle, light switches and door handles) with a bleach-based cleaner after each use
- don't share towels and flannels
- wash contaminated clothes and sheets separately from other washing at the highest possible temperature
- when visiting someone in hospital, observe any visiting guidelines, avoid taking any children under the age of 12, and wash your hands with liquid soap and water when entering and leaving ward areas – do not rely on alcohol hand gels, as they're not effective against *C. difficile*
- avoid visiting hospital if you're feeling unwell or have recently had diarrhoea

Further information on *Clostridium difficile* can be found on the Regional Infection Prevention and Control Manual for Northern Ireland available at:

<https://www.niinfectioncontrolmanual.net/clostridium-difficile>

Click to download the *C. difficile* leaflet

https://www.niinfectioncontrolmanual.net/sites/default/files/C_Diff_Leaflet_04_16.pdf