

# Clostridium Difficile

## What is *Clostridium difficile*?

*Clostridium difficile* (also known as *C. diff*) is the most common cause of diarrhea in hospitals. The *Clostridium difficile* bacteria produce a toxin that can cause inflammation of the intestinal tract. The affected person may experience diarrhea and other serious intestinal conditions.

## How do I get *C. difficile* disease?

To get sick with *C. difficile*, you must first have *C. difficile* bacteria in your bowel. Normally, the good bacteria that work to keep your bowel healthy also keep the *C. diff* bacteria in check. If something happens to disrupt the balance of good bacteria, the *C. diff* may multiply and cause illness. Taking antibiotics is one way the good bacteria can be disrupted. Other factors that may disrupt the balance of good bacteria include:

- Gastro-intestinal surgery/manipulation
- Certain stomach medications
- A long stay in a health care setting
- A serious underlying illness
- A weakened immune system
- Advanced age

## What does it mean if I am colonized with *C. difficile*?

To be colonized with *C. diff* means that the *C. diff* bacteria live in your intestines but are not making you sick. However, you can spread the bacteria to others if you do not wash your hands properly after using the toilet. It is estimated that five to ten percent of people carry this bacteria without any illness – in hospitals and long-term care homes that number may be much greater.

## What are the symptoms of *C. difficile* disease?

If you develop *C. difficile* disease, the usual symptoms are watery diarrhea, fever, loss of appetite, nausea, abdominal pain or tenderness. The diarrhea may appear less than a week after acquiring *C. difficile*, or not until the person starts taking antibiotics.

## How is *C. difficile* treated?

For people with mild symptoms, no treatment is needed as the symptoms will often resolve on their own once the antibiotic is discontinued or altered. In severe cases, medication and possibly surgery may be needed.

## How is *C. difficile* spread?

*Clostridium difficile* is most often transmitted on the hands of health care personnel who have touched contaminated stool or surfaces. People can become infected if they touch items or surfaces that are contaminated with *C. difficile* and then touch their mouth or eat with contaminated hands. *C. difficile* can survive in the environment for long periods of time, increasing the likelihood of it being spread to others. *C. difficile* has been found on toilets, counters, sinks, floors, thermometers and stethoscopes.

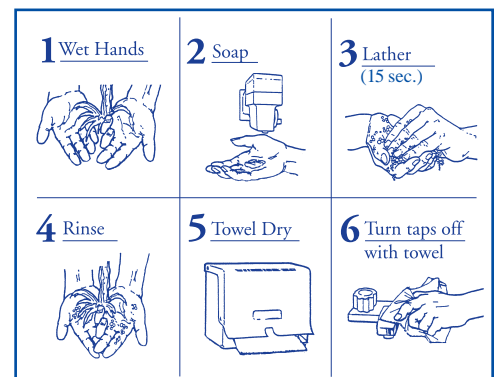
## What can be done to stop the spread of *C. difficile*?

1. **Practice good hand hygiene**, as *C. difficile* bacteria are mainly spread by unwashed hands.

**Washing hands with soap and water is the preferred hand hygiene method, as *C. difficile* produces spores are not killed by alcohol.** However if handwashing facilities are unavailable, the use of a hand sanitizer is recommended until a sink is available.

**a. Wash hands frequently for at least 15 seconds using the 6-step method, and especially:**

- After visiting the washroom
- Before handling, preparing, serving or eating food
- When hands look or feel dirty
- After blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing
- When providing care to an ill person
- When visiting a hospital or long-term care home



**OR**

**b. Use a hand sanitizer** when handwashing facilities are not available and hands are not visibly soiled. When using a hand sanitizer, apply enough to wet the entire hand and rub solution into hands until completely dry.

**2. Clean the environment.** In addition to practicing good hand hygiene, thoroughly clean the person's environment (bedroom, bathroom, equipment) to prevent further spread of the organism. For *C. difficile* it is important to clean using friction to remove as much of the contamination as possible. Use an all purpose household cleaner and follow the directions on the label.

**Be sure to:**

- Remove any visible feces (stool) **prior** to starting the cleaning process
- Always clean in the direction of **least soiled to heaviest soiled areas**
- Wet the surface well and clean using good **friction**
- Pay special attention to frequently touched surfaces and areas that may be soiled with feces such as the toilet and sink. For heavily soiled areas you may want to disinfect the area using a solution of 5 ml (1 teaspoon) of household bleach mixed with one litre of water. Apply the solution to the surface after cleaning and allow surface to air dry

**Note: No special precautions are required for handling dishes or waste**

For further information, please call:  
York Region Health Services Health Connection **1-800-361-5653**  
[www.york.ca](http://www.york.ca)



**3. Clean Clothes/Fabric.** Wash clothes/fabric separately if they are heavily soiled with feces:

- Rinse off feces
- Clean in a hot water cycle with soap
- Dry items in the dryer on high heat if possible
- Dry clean where appropriate
- *C. difficile* is resistant to sunlight; therefore drying clothes in the sunlight will not kill the *C. diff* spores

**4. Use Antibiotics Wisely.** To limit the development of new antibiotic resistant organisms, we all have to use antibiotics properly. It is important to:

- **Finish any antibiotics prescribed for you**, even if you feel better before they are gone. If you do not take all of your antibiotics, some of the stronger bacteria will not be killed and these may develop antibiotic resistance
- **Use antibiotics only for serious bacterial infections.** Antibiotics do not kill viruses like influenza (the “flu”) and the common cold, and so you should not take antibiotics for them. By taking an antibiotic when it is not needed, you could be helping the bacteria in your body to develop resistance to that antibiotic
- **Only take antibiotics prescribed for you;** do not share them with others who have a similar illness

## Can people with *C. difficile* have visitors?

**Yes.** Restrictions on activities or visitors at home or in the community are not necessary.

- If you are visiting a person with an ARO in hospital or a long-term care home, you may be asked by staff to wear gloves and gown before having contact with the person or his/her environment. This will reduce the chance of your spreading the germ to others. It is very important to perform hand hygiene after visiting these facilities. Wash your hands using the six-step method or use a hand sanitizer if hands are not visibly soiled
- When visiting health care providers in the community (doctor, nurse, physiotherapist), tell them about your *C. difficile* so they can take the appropriate precautions (e.g. handwashing, use of gloves)

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