

Clostridium difficile



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Information for Patients and Families

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Created: 04/2005

Form: D-5075 (07/2007)

C034-A



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What do I need to do when I get home?

You can go home on the antibiotics used to treat *C. difficile* if your diarrhea has stopped.

Take the medication that your doctor ordered until it is finished.

Once you are at home, hand washing is the most important thing that you can do, especially after you use the toilet. You do not have to use a separate toilet, sink or bathtub from your family members.

If you are finished your medication and the diarrhea returns, you should see your family doctor.

Who can I talk to if I have concerns?

The University Health Network Infection Prevention & Control team is always available to answer your questions. If you wish to know more about *C. difficile*, please ask your nurse to contact the Infection Control Practitioner dedicated to your unit. You may also e-mail us at infectioncontrol@uhn.on.ca. If you have specific questions regarding your plan of care or your medications, please contact your doctor or pharmacist.

Infection Prevention and Control (IPAC) is a corporate service for UHN's three hospitals. We monitor all in-patient floors and support service areas. Our mandate is to increase the quality of patient care by identifying sources of infections and preventing their spread through surveillance, education, and consultation.

What is Clostridium difficile?

Clostridium difficile (also called *C. difficile* or *C. diff.*) is a bacterium that produces a toxin or type of poison that can cause swelling in the intestinal tract. You will usually have symptoms like diarrhea, fever and abdominal pain.

How did I get *C. difficile*?

The *C. difficile* bacterium can be found in the bowels of some people without causing disease, and people in good health generally do not get *C. difficile* disease. If you have been on certain antibiotics or some types of chemotherapy, the normal balance of healthy bacteria (those that help you digest your food) and harmful ones (bacteria that make you sick) in your bowel can change. This makes it easier for *C. difficile* to grow and cause infection.

C. difficile is passed from a person's body in the stool. If you have *C. difficile* and you clean yourself after a bowel movement, you can get it on your hands. You can then pass it from your hands to whatever you touch. The UHN maintains a high level of daily cleaning in all patient areas; however, *C. difficile* is a very hardy bacterium and can stay on objects for up to 30 days or more. You can get *C. difficile* if you touch something that happens to have the bacterium on it, then touch your mouth. This is why hand hygiene is extremely important.

How does my health care team treat this?

If we think you have a *C. difficile* infection, we will ask you to give a stool sample. This will be tested for the bacteria and/or its toxins. To prevent spreading *C. difficile* to other patients, we may ask everyone who cares for or visits you to follow special procedures called "Contact precautions". In addition, your doctor may order additional medication to treat your *C. difficile* infection.

What are these special precautions?

If we need to take special "Contact precautions", you will usually be placed in a private room. Your healthcare workers and visitors will be asked to wear gloves and gowns when with you. We may also limit what you can do outside of your room.

You will need to take special care with hand hygiene, especially after using the toilet or bedpan, before eating and if you leave your room. Although a rigorous 15 second soap and water hand wash is the best option for killing *C. difficile*, where a hand washing sink is not available alcohol-based hand rinses can and should be used. Wash your hands with soap and water once you are near a sink. It is also very important for all staff and visitors to wash their hands when they enter and leave your room.

Why are special precautions needed?

We do not want to spread *C. difficile* to anyone else. We need to use "Contact precautions" because surfaces like toilets and common areas that hands touch can easily become contaminated with the bacteria. "Contact precautions" prevents the *C. difficile* bacteria from spreading to surfaces such as the healthcare worker's hands, uniforms, and other hospital equipment, then spreading to other patients.

How long will these special precautions last?

The diarrhea caused by a *C. difficile* infection usually stops after several days of medication that your doctor has ordered to treat this infection. The special "Contact precautions" are usually only necessary while you are having diarrhea.

Can I give this to my family or friends?

Healthy people are at very low risk of getting this infection. The best protection for your family and friends is to wash their hands and follow the special precautions while they visit you in the hospital.

Will I have this condition for the rest of my life? Or does it go away when the symptoms go away?

No, you will not have this condition for the rest of your life. We can treat *C. difficile* successfully using special antibiotics.

When you are being treated for *C. difficile*, your symptoms (e.g. diarrhea) will usually go away after a few days of specific antibiotics. Once you finish all the antibiotics and you do not have any more diarrhea, the *C. difficile* is usually gone. However, a more powerful strain of *C. difficile* now exists that may cause relapses of the disease. If you experience a relapse of *C. difficile*, you will be treated again with specific antibiotics. You may also get re-infected with *C. difficile* after it has been successfully treated, which is why hand hygiene so important on a day to day basis.

Who is most vulnerable to get *C. difficile*?

Some people are at higher risk of getting *C. difficile* infection. This includes any adults who:

- must be hospitalized for long periods
- are elderly
- use certain antibiotics, or
- have other serious illnesses, such as cancer

Children rarely develop *C. difficile* infections; however, children who must spend long periods of time in hospital due to serious illnesses are at risk.