

Clostridium difficile (C. diff)

*You can help
stop the spread
of C. diff by
keeping your
hands clean.*

What is C. diff?

C. diff is a bacteria that can be found in the bowels. Small amounts may be normal. Large amounts may lead to infection.

What is C. diff infection?

Some types of C. diff produce toxins (harmful substances). These toxins can:

- Irritate the bowel
- Cause diarrhea
- Lead to infection

In some cases, certain antibiotics may suppress the normal bacteria in your bowel. This may then cause the C. diff levels to increase, raising the risk of infection.

You are also at risk for C. diff infection if you:

- Are a patient in the hospital
- Live in a nursing home
- Are elderly
- Have a weakened immune system (cancer, HIV, etc.)
- Had bowel surgery

How is C. diff transmitted (spread)?

Most cases of C. diff occur in patients taking antibiotics.

C. diff can live outside of the body for a very long time and can be spread by touching contaminated surfaces and not cleaning the hands. Examples include medical equipment, bed rails, bed linen, bathroom fixtures.

C. diff can also be spread on the gloved or ungloved hands of nurses, doctors, other healthcare workers and visitors.

What are the symptoms of C. diff infection?

Three or more episodes of diarrhea in 24 hours is the most common sign of C. diff. You may also have a fever, loss of appetite, nausea and stomach cramping. If C. diff is suspected, a sample of your stool may be tested.

How is C. diff infection treated?

If you are on antibiotics, your doctor may stop them. Other types of antibiotics targeting C. diff bacteria may be given either by mouth or IV (into the vein).

What special precautions will the hospital staff use to take care of me?

“**Contact Plus**” precautions are followed when caring for you. This means all hospital staff and visitors will wear gowns and gloves when entering your room. (You may leave your door open.) Hospital cleaning staff will clean your room daily using a disinfectant cleaner with bleach. These steps help prevent further spread of C. diff.

How long will I need to be on contact precautions?

You will be on these precautions until your diarrhea has stopped.

May I have visitors?

Yes, you may have visitors. Visitors should report to the nurses’ station for directions on what to do to enter your room. Visitors are not likely to get C. diff from you, but they should:

- Clean their hands before they enter and when they leave your room.
- Wear isolation gowns and gloves when entering your room.

How can I prevent the spread of C. diff in the home?

While most healthy people are not at risk for becoming ill from C. diff, it is important to know that being on an antibiotic increases a person’s risk of getting C. diff. You can help prevent the spread of C. diff in the home by:

- Washing your hands often with soap and water. Always wash your hands after using the bathroom and before eating and cooking food. If you are given medicines for C. diff, be sure to take it as prescribed.
- People who live with you should clean their hands often.
- If your diarrhea gets worse or comes back after your treatment, call your doctor right away.

Northwestern Medicine – Health Information Resources

For more information, contact Northwestern Memorial Hospital’s Alberto Culver Health Learning Center (HLC) at hlc@nm.org, or by calling 312.926.5465. You may also visit the HLC on the 3rd floor, Galter Pavilion at 251 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL. Health information professionals can help you find the information you need and provide you with personal support at no charge.

For more information about Northwestern Medicine, please visit our website at nm.org.

Para asistencia en español, por favor llamar al Departamento de Representantes para Pacientes al 312.926.3112.

The entities that come together as Northwestern Medicine are committed to representing the communities we serve, fostering a culture of inclusion, delivering culturally competent care, providing access to treatment and programs in a nondiscriminatory manner and eliminating healthcare disparities. For questions, please call either Northwestern Memorial Hospital’s Patient Representatives Department at 312.926.3112, TDD/TTY 312.926.6363, the Northwestern Lake Forest Patient Relations manager at 847.535.8282 and/or the Northwestern Medical Group Patient Representatives Department at 312.695.1100, TDD/TTY 312.926.6363.

Developed by: NMH Department of Infection Control and Prevention