Clostridium difficile infection (CDI)

Patient Information Leaflet
Clostridium difficile, also known as C. difficile or C. diff, is a bacterium that can infect the bowel and cause diarrhoea.

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

Clostridium difficile infections are unpleasant and can sometimes cause serious bowel problems. They can usually be treated with another course of antibiotics.

## Symptoms of CDI

Symptoms of CDI usually develop when you are taking antibiotics or when you have finished taking them within the last few weeks.

The most common symptoms are:

- Watery diarrhoea, which can be bloody
- Painful tummy cramps
- Feeling sick
- Signs of dehydration such as dry mouth, headaches and peeing less often than normal
- A high temperature (fever) of above 38C (100.4F)
- Loss of appetite and weight loss

In some cases, serious complications can develop such as damage to the bowel or severe dehydration which may cause drowsiness, confusion, a rapid heartbeat and fainting.
Who is most at risk of CDI?

CDI mostly affects people who:

- Have been treated with broad-spectrum antibiotics (antibiotics that work against several types of bacteria) or several different antibiotics at the same time or those taking long-term antibiotics.
- A stay in a healthcare setting, such as hospital or care home, for a long time.
- Are over 65 years old.
- Have certain underlying conditions, including inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), cancer or kidney disease.
- Have a weakened immune system, which can be because of a condition such as diabetes or a side effect of a treatment such as chemotherapy or steroid medication.
- Are taking a medication called proton pump inhibitor (PPI) to reduce the amount of stomach acid they produce.
- Had surgery on their digestive system.

Many CDIs used to occur in places where many people take antibiotics and are in close contact with each other such as hospitals and care homes. However, strict infection prevention and control measures have helped to reduce the risk and an increasing number of CDIs now occur outside these settings.

When to get medical advice

Visiting your GP surgery with a possible CDI can put others at risk, so it is best to call your GP or NHS 111 if you are concerned or feel you need advice.

Get medical advice if:

- You have persistent diarrhoea after finishing a course of antibiotics.
- You have bloody diarrhoea.
- You have diarrhoea and experience severe tummy pain, a high fever, a rapid heart rate or fainting.
- You have symptoms of severe dehydration, such as confusion, drowsiness, only passing small amount of urine or no urine at all.

Diarrhoea can be caused by a number of conditions and is a common side effect of antibiotics, so having diarrhoea while taking antibiotics does not necessarily mean you have a CDI.

Your GP may suggest sending off a sample of your poo to confirm whether you have CDI. A blood test may also be carried out to help determine how severe the infection is and sometimes you may need tests or scans in hospital to check if you bowel is damaged.
Treatment for CDI

Your GP will decide whether you need hospital treatment. If the infection is mild, then you can be treated at home.

Treatment for CDI can include:

- Stopping the antibiotics thought to be causing the infection, if possible - in mild cases this may be the only treatment that is needed.
- Taking a 10 to 14-day course of antibiotics that are known to kill Clostridium difficile bacteria.

CDIs usually respond well to treatment with most people making a full recovery in a week or two. However, the symptoms come back in around 1 in 5 cases and treatment may need to be repeated.

Looking after yourself at home

If you are well enough to be treated at home, the following measures can help relieve your symptoms and prevent the infection spreading:

- Make sure you finish the entire course of any antibiotics you are prescribed, even if you are feeling better.
- Drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration and eat plain foods such as soup, rice, pasta and bread if you feel hungry.
- Take paracetamol for tummy pain or fever.
- Do not take anti-diarrhoeal medication as this can stop the infection being cleared from your body.
- Regularly wash your hands and contaminated surfaces, objects or sheets.
- Stay at home until at least 48 hours after your last episode of diarrhoea.

Your GP may contact you regularly to make sure you are getting better. Call them if your symptoms get worse because you may need a different antibiotic or if your symptoms return after treatment finishes as it may need to be repeated.
How you get CDI

Clostridium difficile bacteria are found in the digestive system of about 1 in every 30 healthy adults. The bacteria often live harmlessly because the other bacteria normally found in the bowel keep it under control.

However, some antibiotics can interfere with the bacteria in the bowel which can cause the Clostridium difficile bacteria to multiply and produce toxins that make the person ill.

When this happens, Clostridium 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 are thoroughly cleaned and can infect someone else if they get into their mouth.

Someone with CDI is generally considered to be infectious until at least 48 hours after their symptoms have cleared up.

How to stop CDI spreading

CDI can be passed on very easily. You can reduce your risk of picking 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 and do not use flannels or nail brushes.
- Clean contaminated surfaces - such as toilet, flush handle, light switches and door handles - with a bleach-based cleaner after each use.
- Do not share towels or 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 or leaving ward areas.
- Do not rely on alcohol hands gels as they do not kill Clostridium difficile spores.
- Avoid visiting hospital if you are feeling unwell or have recently had diarrhoea.
If you have any questions, contact your GP.

Taken from NHS Choices at: www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Clostridium-difficile/Pages/Introduction.aspx on 31st July 2016

If you would like this information in another language or another format, including audio tape, braille or large print, please call 01473 770 014.

Jeżeli potrzebujesz pomocy w zrozumieniu tych informacji w swoim języku zadzwoń na podany poniżej numer.

Polish

Se precisar de ajuda para ler estas informações em outra língua, por favor telefone para o número abaixo.

Portuguese

Jeigu jums reikia suprasti šia, informacija, kita kalba prašom skambinti šiuo numeriu apačioje

Lithuanian

Kung kailangan mo ng tulong para maunawaan and inpormasiy on sa pamamagitan ng ibang salita, maaaring tumawag sa

Tagalog

Ci vous avez besoin d’aide pour comprendre cet information an une diferente langue, s’il vous plait contacter le numero ci dessous. Merci.

French

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