What is Clostridium difficile (“C. difficile”)?

*C. difficile* is a spore forming bacterium which causes diarrhoea. Although in most cases it causes a relatively mild illness, occasionally and particularly in elderly patients, it may result in serious illness and even death. The bacteria produces two toxins which are responsible for the diarrhoea and which damage the cells lining the bowel.

What are the symptoms of *C. difficile* infection?

Symptoms of *C. difficile* infection can include:

- mild to moderate diarrhoea with a very unpleasant smell
- stomach cramps and tenderness
- loss of appetite
- fever
- nausea

Sometimes symptoms can be more severe. Occasionally the inflammation of the bowel progresses to pseudomembranous colitis, which is life-threatening and may require surgery.

How do you develop the infection?

The infection may occur after someone has taken antibiotics to treat another illness. The medication disturbs the bacteria normally found in the gut and if *C. difficile* is present in the gut it can then multiply, leading to symptomatic disease. In some cases symptoms can develop up to 10 weeks after finishing a course of antibiotics.

*C. difficile* can be also spread from person to person on unwashed hands and as a result of touching surfaces which have become contaminated with spores.
**Who can get C. difficile?**

*C. difficile* infection is mostly found in people who are already unwell. Elderly patients with other underlying diseases are most at risk. More than 80 per cent of cases are in people over 65 years of age. However, infection can occur in anyone who has:

- been treated with antibiotics
- undergone gastrointestinal surgery/manipulation
- an immune system which is not working properly

**What is the treatment for C. difficile infection?**

Severe or persistent diarrhoea due to *C. difficile* infection is treated with specific antibiotics.

It is important to drink plenty of fluids, as diarrhoea or vomiting can lead to dehydration and you can lose important sugars and minerals from your body. If you feel sick, try taking small sips of fluid, frequently. Avoid tea, coffee, carbonated drinks or alcohol. You should dilute sugary drinks even if you would not normally dilute them. A simple painkiller like paracetamol can help combat any pain.

**Why are we seeing on-going cases of C. difficile?**

There are large numbers of elderly and unwell people in hospitals who are undergoing courses of antibiotic treatment, and new strains of the bacteria are developing that can spread more easily and are capable of causing more disease. The different strains of *C. difficile* (called Ribotypes) are numbered from 001 upwards. One of the strains of *C. difficile* is Ribotype 027, which has proved to be easily spread around hospitals and has been associated with an increase in the numbers and disease severity of cases.
How can I help prevent the spread of *C. difficile*?

Take antibiotics only when necessary and complete the prescribed course.

**Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water:**
- after going to the toilet
- after visiting hospitals and care homes
- before preparing and eating food
- after handling raw food

Alcohol handrubs are not effective against *C. difficile* so it remains important to wash your own hands and the hands of those you care for (or help them wash their own hands) with soap and warm water.

Clean all food preparation areas and utensils before and after use.

If someone has *C. difficile* infection, wash all their dirty clothes, bedding and towels in the washing machine on the hottest cycle possible recommended for the fabric, separately from other laundry. After use, clean toilet seats, toilet bowls, flush handles, taps and wash hand basins with detergent and hot water.

**Further information**

Any further concerns or questions should be discussed with hospital staff (nurses, medical staff, Infection Control Team); your GP or community nursing staff; or public health (communicable disease) staff.

For further information, contact NHS Direct on 0845 46 47 (website: www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/articles/article.aspx?articleId=2139)

or the National Public Health Service (website: www.wales.nhs.uk/sites3/page.cfm?orgid=379&pid=13577)

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