

# Clostridium Difficile General Information

## What is Clostridium Difficile?

*Clostridium difficile* (*C. difficile*) is a kind of bacteria. It causes:

- mild to severe diarrhea
- more serious intestinal conditions like inflammation of the colon (pseudomembranous colitis).

*C. difficile* is normally found in soil and other natural environments. It can also live in our own gut or bowel.

*C. difficile* is the most common cause of infectious diarrhea in Canadian hospitals and long-term care facilities.

## Who can get C. difficile?

Any patient receiving antibiotics is at risk for *C. difficile*. Here's why: Many different kinds of bacteria live in our gut and bowel. Most of these are "good" bacteria – that is, they help us to stay healthy. Antibiotics can change the mix of bacteria in the bowel and may decrease the amount of good bacteria. This allows *C. difficile* to take over. When this happens, the *C. difficile* bacteria produce toxins that can irritate the bowel and cause diarrhea.

The elderly, people who have other illnesses, and people who are already taking antibiotics are at a greater risk of infection.

Healthy people do not usually get *C. difficile* infections.

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms include:

- watery diarrhea
- fever
- loss of appetite
- nausea
- abdominal pain/tenderness

It is possible to be infected with *C. difficile* and not show any symptoms.

## How is it spread?

*C. difficile* is most often spread through direct contact – for example with infected hands or gloves. Shared items such as contaminated thermometers or commodes may also spread it.

## How is it treated?

People with mild symptoms may not need any treatment at all.

For more severe cases, a healthcare provider will prescribe medication (like antibiotics) to be taken for 10 days. The drugs used to treat *C. difficile* are effective and have few side effects.

## How can you prevent *C. difficile* infection?

Hand washing with soap and water is the most effective way of preventing the spread of infections like *C. difficile*. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers are less effective than washing with soap and water because they do not destroy all of the *C. difficile*.

*C. difficile* can also be limited by:

- careful use of antibiotics
- strictly following infection prevention and control measures in hospitals, long-term care facilities and other healthcare facilities