

Clostridium difficile

FACT SHEET

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.