

Clostridioides difficile (C. diff)

This leaflet gives information about C. diff. If you have any questions, please speak to the staff member looking after you.

What is C. diff?

C. diff is a spore forming bacteria that lives harmlessly in the gut of around 1 in 20 people. It is usually kept under control by the normal good bacteria in the gut. However, when these normal bacteria are disturbed, for example by antibiotic treatment, regular laxative use, proton pump inhibitors or bowel surgery, C. diff can multiply and may cause an infection in the gut.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Symptoms of C. diff infection can include watery or sometimes bloody diarrhoea, stomach cramps, abdominal swelling, feeling sick, loss of appetite and fever. Most people become mildly to moderately unwell and make a full recovery. However, in a small number of people, more severe inflammation of the bowel (known as colitis) can occur, which can cause more serious symptoms and may be life threatening.

Who is at risk of colonisation or infection?

You may be at higher risk of C. diff colonisation or infection if you are currently taking, or have recently completed, a course of antibiotics, especially if you have had multiple courses. People who are already unwell and vulnerable to infection, such as those undergoing cancer treatment, are also at higher risk. Adults over the age of 65 account for most cases. People taking certain medications or who have had bowel surgery may also be at increased risk because these can disrupt the balance of healthy gut bacteria. Children over the age of two years can occasionally be affected, although this is less common.

Do I need any tests to confirm the diagnosis?

A sample of diarrhoea will be sent to the laboratory to test for C. diff toxin, as it is the toxin that causes illness. Sometimes the toxin is not detected, but the C. diff bacteria capable of producing toxin are present. This is known as colonisation or being a C. diff carrier. Carriers may not have symptoms caused by the bacteria, however if they are experiencing diarrhoea from another cause, they can still shed C. diff into the environment and potentially spread it to others, especially in healthcare settings.

What happens if my result is positive?

If you are diagnosed with C. diff diarrhoea while you are in hospital, you will be cared for in a single room with your own toilet or commode. You will stay in this room until at least 48 to

72 hours after your diarrhoea has stopped. If you are well enough to go home, you may still be discharged even if you still have symptoms. You must wash your hands with soap and water, or use hand hygiene wipes, after using the toilet and before all meals. Staff will wash their hands with soap and water (as alcohol gel does not kill C. diff) and will use gloves and an apron when providing direct care. Your room and surrounding surfaces must be kept tidy and free from clutter to allow all surfaces to be thoroughly cleaned.

What is the treatment or management of C. diff?

If you are diagnosed with a C. diff infection, your current antibiotics and other medications will be reviewed. Some may be stopped or changed to allow your normal gut bacteria to recover. You will also be prescribed a specific antibiotic to treat C. diff infection, such as oral vancomycin or fidaxomicin. If you are found to be a C. diff carrier, meaning the bacteria are present but not causing illness, you may not need treatment unless your doctors suspect active infection.

Can I have visitors?

Yes. C. diff does not usually cause illness in healthy people, so visitors are a low risk. Visitors should wash their hands with soap and water before and after touching you or your surroundings, and again when leaving the ward. They do not need to wear gloves or aprons unless they are helping with your personal care. Visitors must sit on the chairs provided and should not sit on your bed. They must also use public toilets, not the toilet in your room, if needed.

When can I go home?

You can go home when you are well enough to be discharged. If you have any concerns once you are home, you may contact your GP for advice.

Contact us

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.epsom-sthelier.nhs.uk or www.stgeorges.nhs.uk.

Additional services

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS can offer you advice and information when you have comments or concerns about our services or care.

Tel: St Helier 020 8296 2508 / Epsom 01372 735243/ St. Georges 020 8725 2453

Email: ESTH est-tr.PALS@nhs.net / St Georges pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk

NHS UK

The NHS provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make decisions about your health.

Web: www.nhs.uk

NHS 111

You can call 111 when you need medical help fast but it's not a 999 emergency. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones.



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