

Prevent and Manage Infections Safely: *C. difficile*

STAFF FACT SHEET

Advancing Excellence in America's Nursing Homes is a national campaign that began in September 2006. Our goal is to improve the quality of care and life for the 1.5 million people served by nursing homes in the United States. Nursing homes and their staff, along with residents and their families and consumers can join in this effort by working on the campaign goals that are designed to improve quality. We do this by providing tools and resources to help nursing homes achieve their quality improvement goals. To learn more about the campaign, visit www.nhqualitycampaign.org.

This fact sheet is about the importance of promoting prevention of *C.difficile* infections as a key part of quality care.

Everyone has an important role in keeping residents safe from infections. Every person working in a nursing home should know some basics about the germs (like bacteria and viruses) which cause infections. They should also know steps they can take to prevent the spread of germs when giving care to residents. The infection prevention goal is focused first on reducing *C.difficile* infections. Knowing ways to avoid this infection will also help stop the spread of many other germs which cause infections in nursing homes.

What is *C. difficile*?

Clostridium difficile [klo-strid-ee-um dif-uh-seel], also known as "*C. diff*" [See-dif], are bacteria that cause serious infections of the large intestines. When the large intestines are infected with *C. diff*, the bacteria can be found in stool (also known as "feces").

How is *C. diff* spread?

When a person is ill with *C. diff* and has diarrhea, lots of the bacteria can be shed in their feces. Their skin, clothes or things around them (for example, bed side tables or door knobs) can get dirty or "contaminated" with the bacteria from their feces. Cleaning is very important but may not remove all the *C. diff* germs. *C. diff* bacteria are very sticky. They are hard to kill and can't be seen. A person caring for someone who is ill with *C. diff* can get his/her hands contaminated with the germ. Once the hands of staff or visitors are contaminated, they can spread *C. diff* to other people they care for or visit. Any equipment (for example, commodes) or devices (for example, blood pressure cuffs) used to care for someone ill with *C. diff* can also become contaminated.

When should I suspect that a person has an intestinal infection from *C. diff*?

People can carry *C. diff* in their large intestine and spread it without showing signs of illness. This is why it is important to follow standard precautions when providing care. The most common sign of intestinal infection from *C. diff* is watery bowel movements (i.e., diarrhea). Often people also lose their appetite, get nausea, or have stomach pain. Sometimes they have fever. Some people are at higher risk of *C. diff* infections. This includes people who have had an infection from *C. diff* in the past and those who have recently taken antibiotics.

How is *C. diff* diagnosed?

C. diff can be found by testing the feces of a person with new or worsening diarrhea. The lab tests can find *C. diff* toxins (proteins the bacteria make that irritate the lining of the intestine) or find the bacteria itself in the stool. Only liquid stool samples should be sent for *C. diff* testing. These must be collected when a person is having diarrhea. Early diagnosis of *C. diff* infection lets an ill person be treated quickly. It also means measures can be put in place to avoid spreading *C. diff* to others.

Who is at risk for getting an infection from *C. diff*?

Not everyone who comes into contact with the *C. diff* germ will become sick. If you are healthy and follow good infection control practices, you are not likely to become ill from *C. diff*, even when caring for someone who has *C. diff* infection. Recent antibiotic use raises a person's risk of getting *C. diff*. People who need antibiotics for illnesses are at higher risk. Older adults, especially those who are frail, are also at more risk for developing *C. diff* infections. As you get older, your body is less able to fight infections and the infections in older adults can be worse than in younger people.

How do antibiotics increase the risk for *C. diff* -- don't they kill bacteria?

We do use antibiotics to kill harmful bacteria that cause infections. But these same drugs can also kill helpful bacteria. Some of these helpful bacteria live in our large intestines. They help us break down food. They also protect us from harmful germs, like *C. diff*. When an antibiotic kills off those helpful bacteria, *C. diff* germs are able to stay in our large intestines and make us ill.

Why are people in nursing homes at greater risk for *C. diff*?

People in nursing homes often need medical care or assistance with daily activities. Staff and visitors assisting people need to follow safe practices to avoid spreading *C. diff* to when providing care or assistance. The shared living spaces in a nursing home can also allow the spread of germs like *C. diff*, from people with intestinal infections to others.

How can nursing assistants, therapists, and other direct care staff avoid the spread of *C. diff*?

People who work with residents and/or give hands-on care all have an important role in avoiding *C. diff*. Here are a few ways you can do your part:

- Help notice and report when people might be showing signs of *C. diff*.
- Ask residents and their families to tell you if they notice changes in bowel habits or other signs of new *C. diff*.
- Always clean hands well when caring for all residents. Encourage others to do the same.
- Always use gowns and gloves in keeping with Standard and Contact Precautions, especially during care of residents with *C. diff* infection. Remember to clean hands before and after resident care, even when gloves are used. Encourage others to do the same.

- Always clean and disinfect equipment between caring for different residents.
- Become a leader for infection prevention in your nursing home.

How can nursing and medical staff avoid the spread of *C. diff*?

In addition to giving hands-on care, the people who do assessments, document resident care and condition, and order and give medications and other treatments all have additional roles in *C. diff* prevention. Here are a few ideas for more ways you can do your part:

- Document and communicate signs and symptoms of *C. diff* when they happen.
- Start contact precautions and other activities to prevent the spread of *C. diff* as soon as a person is found to have signs and symptoms that might be *C. diff*.
- Make sure that a stool sample for lab testing for *C. diff* is collected quickly when a person has new or worsening diarrhea.
- Be sure only liquid stools are collected. Be sure samples are handled the right way when being sent for lab testing for *C. diff*.
- Communicate the results of *C. diff* testing to medical staff as soon as results are available.
- Teach residents and family how antibiotics can increase the risk for *C. diff*.
- Teach residents and family about the signs of *C. diff* when starting an antibiotic.
- Become a leader for appropriate antibiotic use and infection prevention in your nursing home.

How can environmental services (also known as housekeeping) staff prevent the spread of *C. diff*?

The people who clean and disinfect rooms, bathrooms, shared spaces, and equipment have a very important role in *C. diff* prevention. Here are a few ideas for how you can do your part:

- Know your nursing home's steps for cleaning and disinfecting rooms both for daily cleaning and when a resident stops occupying that room (for example, if the resident moves or is discharged).
- Look for ways to give feedback on making cleaning more effective.
- Know the products being used for cleaning and disinfection. Know which products work against *C. diff*.
- Always clean hands well when doing housekeeping tasks in your nursing home. Encourage others to do the same.
- Always use gowns and gloves as indicated when doing housekeeping tasks, especially for rooms of residents with *C. diff*. Encourage others to do the same.
- Become a leader for infection prevention in your nursing home.

Everyone should use the infection prevention tools and resources available on the Advancing Excellence website and encourage your nursing home to join the Campaign

Information adapted from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention websites:

http://www.cdc.gov/HAI/organisms/cdiff/Cdiff_faqs_HCP.html

http://www.cdc.gov/hai/organisms/cdiff/Cdiff_clinicians.html

Disclaimer:

As of September 2020 the Quality Campaign has been picked up by a concerned group of citizens, doctors, providers, researchers and consumers who want to see the good work of the past live on and help collect more info to shape the quality of healthcare in America. If you would like to join the effort, please call: 972-800-6670.

<https://nhqualitycampaign.org/resources-downloads/>