

Clostridium Difficile (C. Diff) Infection: Caring for Yourself and Others

What Is C. Diff?

Clostridium difficile (pronounced klo-strid-ee-um dif-uh-seel)—commonly referred to as “C. diff”—is a type of bacteria (germ) that can infect the gastrointestinal tract. The gastrointestinal tract includes the stomach, the small intestine, and the colon. When *C. diff* grows out of control in the colon, it can lead to *C. diff* infection (CDI). CDI causes diarrhea and stomach pain due to inflammation (swelling) of the intestines. For more information about *C. diff* and CDI, see the Peggy Lillis Foundation’s (PLF’s) *Clostridium Difficile (C. Diff) Infection* factsheet at www.peggyfoundation.org.

C. diff is found throughout the environment in soil, air, water, human and animal feces, and in contaminated food products, such as processed foods. *C. diff* bacteria can survive in harsh conditions for long periods of time by producing spores (rugged, seed-like structures). These spores can tolerate the acidic condition in the stomach.

CDI can be spread by touching something contaminated with *C. diff* spores (such as bed linens, bathroom fixtures, door handles and knobs, and medical equipment) and through direct contact with infected individuals. To learn more about how to prevent CDI, see the PLF’s *Clostridium Difficile (C. Diff) Infection: Prevention and Risk Factors* factsheet at www.peggyfoundation.org.

Once CDI is diagnosed, it is very important that patients learn how to properly care for themselves so they do not become re-infected or spread the infection to others.

How Do I Care for Myself if I Have CDI?

The following steps should be taken if you have CDI:

- Follow the advice of your doctor regarding antibiotics. Only take those prescribed by your doctor and make sure to finish the full course of antibiotics even if you start feeling better.
- Fluids are quickly lost from your body when you have diarrhea caused by CDI, so it is important to drink lots of fluids to replace what is lost. In severe cases of

dehydration, your doctor may need to administer fluids through an intravenous drip into your vein.

- Ask that all health care providers wash their hands well with soap and water both before and after they care for you. Remind them to do so if you have not seen them wash their hands.
- Make sure that all health care providers wear gloves and gowns while caring for you.
- Practice proper hand hygiene by washing well with soap and water before eating and before and after using the bathroom.
- Do not take antacids (stomach acid-reducing medications) if you do not absolutely need them. Acids produced in your stomach kill *C. diff* bacteria (but not *C. diff* spores) before they can reach your gut. Taking antacids makes these stomach acids less active, allowing *C. diff* bacteria to travel to your gut and start causing symptoms.
- Frequently clean any surfaces that you touch at home (especially in the bathroom) daily with a freshly prepared bleach solution (1 part chlorine bleach plus 9 parts tap water). Take precautions when using the bleach such as gloves worn when preparing and cleaning as well as a mask to lessen the risk of inhaling the bleach. Be sure to wipe the surface very well and let the surface air dry.
- If your home has more than one bathroom, restrict use of one of them for yourself and have family and visitors use another.
- If you experience diarrhea after you return home from the hospital, contact your doctor immediately and follow his/her directions.
- If you have more than one bathroom, restrict the use of one of them for yourself and have family and visitors use another.
- Consider limiting contact with individuals with known CDI (see next page).



KNOW THE FACTS

How Do I Care for Others With CDI?

The actions needed to take care of others with CDI are very similar to those that patients with CDI should take to care for themselves:

- If the person with CDI is in the hospital, ensure they stay in their room as much as possible and do not go to common areas such as the cafeteria and gift shop until the diarrhea has stopped.
- Ask visitors coming into the hospital room to wear a gown and gloves, and remind them to wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water before leaving the room.
- Make certain persons with CDI only take the antibiotics prescribed by their doctor and that they complete the full course of antibiotics.
- Ensure that the person with CDI is not dehydrated. Provide them with plenty of fluids, and call a doctor if you think they are not improving after drinking lots of fluids. Symptoms of dehydration include increased thirst, dry mouth, feeling tired or sleepy, decreased urine output, urine that is more yellow than usual, headache, dry skin, and dizziness.
- Make sure the person with CDI washes their hands before eating and before and after using the bathroom. Washing with soap and water is recommended instead of alcohol-based hand sanitizers such as Purell® that do not kill *C. diff* spores.
- Use gloves and wash your hands well with soap and water after caring for the person with CDI. Make sure that all others who come into contact with them do the same.
- Keep antacids away from persons with CDI unless they absolutely need them and the doctor has approved their use.
- Remember to clean all surfaces touched by the person with CDI with a freshly prepared bleach solution. Prepare the bleach solution by mixing 1 part chlorine bleach with 9 parts tap water. Take precautions when using the bleach such as gloves worn when preparing and cleaning

as well as a mask to lessen the risk of inhaling the bleach. Scrub the surface well and let it air dry.

- If your home has more than one bathroom, restrict use of one of them for the patient with CDI and have family and visitors use another.
- Wash clothes worn by the person with CDI separately, and use the laundry cycle with the highest temperature that the clothes will tolerate. It is important to wash your hands with soap and water after you have handled the clothes.
- Patients with CDI face significant socio-emotional challenges (eg, humiliation, embarrassment, loneliness and worry when placed in isolation, fear of recurrence of CDI, and fear that the condition may be life threatening). Patients are also not able to participate in usual daily activities, leading to collapse of their social lives. It is therefore essential that caregivers and health professionals listen to patients' concerns, address their fears and misconceptions, and ensure that they receive extensive information about CDI and its implications. Education of visitors and relatives is also important.

What Are the Danger Signs I Should Be Aware Of?

Patients with severe CDI are at risk for toxic megacolon and sepsis, both life-threatening conditions. Caregivers should watch out for the following signs and seek emergency medical treatment if either condition is suspected.

- Symptoms of toxic megacolon include abdominal distention, pain and tenderness, high fever, rapid heart rate, paleness (pallor), mental changes (confusion), shock, and absence of bowel sounds.
- Signs of sepsis are similar and include shivers, high fever, extreme pain or general discomfort, pale or discolored skin, sleepiness, confusion, and shortness of breath. Patients may sometimes state, "I feel like I might die."

For more information on CDI, please visit www.peggyfoundation.org.

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