

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 lower intestines, mainly the colon. When a person has a *C. diff* infection, the bacteria are in their bowel movements (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