Let's Talk About...

Clostridium difficile

(C. difficile or C. diff)

Clostridium difficile (klo-STRID-ee-um DIF-ah-seal), also called C. difficile, is a bacteria commonly found in the intestines. Some types of C. difficile produce toxins (a poisonous substance), while others do not. Types that produce toxins cause a person to be sick, especially if there is a large amount of these bacteria in the intestines. Most C. difficile infections occur in the hospital during or after a person takes antibiotics. A person can also get sick from C. difficile weeks after going home from the hospital or weeks after stopping antibiotics. Antibiotics can kill the normal bacteria in the intestines. This allows C. difficile to grow in large numbers. Other reasons a person might get sick with C. difficile is that he has had stomach or bowel surgery, has been in the hospital for a long time, or has a serious illness or problem with his immune system. C. difficile bacteria are common in the environment and can survive for months on surfaces that have not been cleaned and disinfected properly. People may become infected if they touch items contaminated with stool (poop) and then touch their mouth area.

What are the symptoms of C. difficile?

- Diarrhea (often with blood or mucus)
- Fever
- Nausea
- Dehydration (extreme loss of body fluids)
- Stomach pain, tenderness, or cramping
- Loss of appetite

How is C. difficile diagnosed?

To find out if your child has C. difficile, a stool sample will be sent to the laboratory for testing. The results will be back in about 24 to 72 hours.

How will my child's doctor treat C. difficile?

Your child's doctor will order medications called antibiotics to treat C. difficile. These antibiotics kill the bacteria; your child will receive these for about 10 days. Your child may have an IV (a small tube that goes into the vein) placed so he can receive medications and fluids.

Are there any complications from C. difficile infections?

C. difficile can cause complications if it is not treated with antibiotics and fluids. These may include low blood pressure, electrolyte (body salt) imbalance, infection of the blood, irritation of the stomach lining, intestinal blockage, and rarely, it may even cause death.

Preventing C. difficile infections while your child is in the hospital:

Even if C. difficile is treated, the germs can still spread to other people. While your child is in the hospital you and your caregivers can work together to keep C. difficile from spreading.

Your healthcare providers will do these things:

- Clean their hands with soap and water after caring for each patient. They can use alcohol-based hand rub before they enter the room, but they must use soap and water after caring for your child. This is because alcohol-based hand rub does not kill all C. difficile germs.
- Wear gloves and a protective gown over their clothing while caring for your child and remove them before leaving the room.
- Place your child in "Contact Precautions" isolation. Your child will not be able to leave his room as long as he has diarrhea symptoms because C. difficile can spread to other patients. Children with C. difficile can usually spread the disease until their diarrhea stops. Sometimes the infectious diseases doctors or the hospital infection preventionists will decide it is safe for your child to go outside their

room for a walk, or a wheelchair or wagon ride. But they cannot go in the playroom or Forever Young Zone, gift shop, or cafeteria.

- Put your child in a private room whenever possible. If a private room is not possible, he would share a room with other patients who have the same illness.
- Clean and disinfect medical equipment and frequently touched areas in your child's hospital room with bleach. This cleaning will be done carefully and often. Bleach is the recommended disinfectant for C. difficile.
- Give antibiotics only when necessary.

YOU can do these things:

- Make sure healthcare providers clean their hands before and after caring for your child.
- Clean your own hands often, especially after using the bathroom, changing diapers, and before eating.
- Family do not need to wear gloves and gowns, unless instructed by their caregiver, as long as they wash their hands when they leave.

Visitors to your child's room can do these things:

- Clean their hands thoroughly when entering and leaving the room.
- Visitors do not need to wear gloves and gowns unless instructed by their caregiver, as long as they wash their hands when they leave.

When can my child go home?

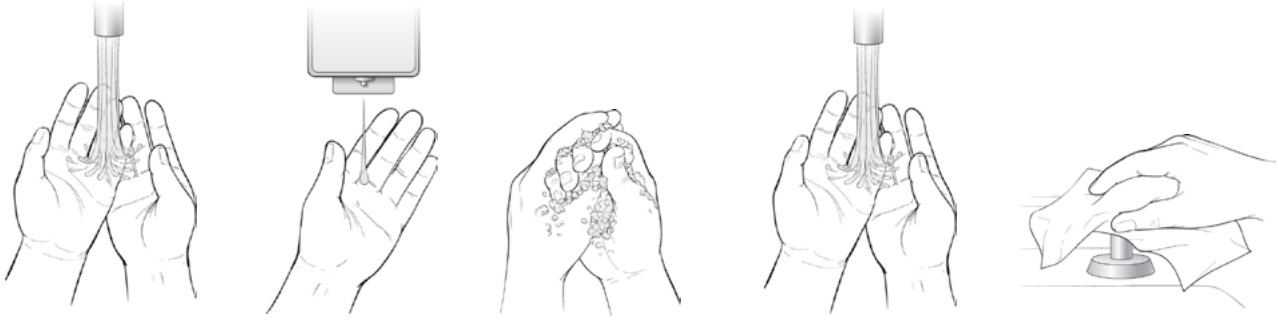
A child with C. difficile can usually go home when the diarrhea stops. He also needs to either be finished with antibiotic treatment or receiving them by mouth. It is also important for your child to have enough body fluids. If he has active diarrhea, he is losing more water than he takes in. This will make him sicker. For more information on diarrhea or dehydration, see the handout ***"Let's Talk About… Dehydration and Diarrhea."*** If your child gets diarrhea again after going home, tell your doctor immediately.

Preventing C. difficile infections when your child goes home:

Once your child is home, he can return to his normal routines. Often, the diarrhea will be better or completely gone before he goes home. This makes giving C. difficile to other people much less likely. There are a few things you should do to lower the chances of your child developing another C. difficile infection or spreading it to others.

- If your child has been given a prescription to treat C. difficile, make sure he takes it exactly as his doctor has prescribed. Don't stop before the

Hand washing with soap and water



Wet hands with warm, running water.

Apply liquid soap or use a clean bar of soap. Lather well.

Rub your hands together vigorously for at least 15 to 20 seconds. Be sure to scrub all surfaces of your hands and fingers.

Rinse well. Dry your hands with a clean or disposable towel.

Use a towel to turn off the faucet.

medication is completed and don't let your child skip doses or take half-doses.

- Another way to prevent C. difficile disease is to avoid unnecessary antibiotics. Do not ask your child's doctor for antibiotics to treat common colds or other viruses because they will not work.
- Clean hands often and well, especially after using the bathroom, changing diapers, and before preparing food or eating. Good hand washing means applying soap and scrubbing vigorously for at least 20 seconds.
- Make sure people who live with you clean their hands often and well.
- If your child gets diarrhea again after going home, tell your doctor immediately.
- Follow other instructions from your child's doctor.

What if I have more questions?

Your child's doctors and nurses are always available to help answer your questions and make you feel as comfortable as possible during your hospital stay.

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