

# *Clostridium difficile* infection (CDI)

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **What is CDI?**

*Clostridium difficile* (often abbreviated to “C diff”) is a spore-forming bacterium that can often be found in people’s intestines and in the environment. However, it does not always cause disease and is present in up to 10% of healthy adults and about two-thirds of babies without causing any symptoms. The bacteria are also found in animals such as pigs, horses and cattle, and can be found in the soil of farms and pastures.

### **How did I get CDI?**

It is believed that the trigger for infection usually is disturbance of the normal bowel microflora during antibiotic treatment. This allows ingested spores to colonise the intestine and produce toxins that attack the lining of the intestinal wall, resulting in gastrointestinal symptoms.

### **What are the symptoms of CDI?**

The symptoms of CDI range from a mild, self-limiting gastrointestinal disease (causing diarrhoea, fever, loss of appetite, nausea and abdominal discomfort) to a more severe life-threatening inflammation of the intestines.

### **How is CDI diagnosed?**

Diagnosis of CDI is made by laboratory detection of the toxin produced by *C. difficile* in the faeces of people with relevant symptoms and a recent history of taking antibiotics.

### **How is CDI treated?**

CDI can be difficult to treat and is associated with a high relapse rate. Treatment of an initial episode is usually with a specific antibiotic called metronidazole. Another antibiotic called vancomycin may be used for severe disease and subsequent recurrences. Alternative treatments such as probiotics have not been shown to be effective. However, in cases of repeated recurrence and severe disease, recent studies have shown that a “faecal transplant” from a healthy individual can be effective.

### **How is CDI spread?**

The main source of transmission in the hospital environment is patients with symptomatic CDI. These patients shed large numbers of spores in faeces, resulting in widespread contamination of their skin, bed linen and nearby environmental surfaces. These spores are resistant to drying and the usual chemical cleaning agents, and can therefore remain in the environment for extended periods of time. Spores can then be picked up on the hands of other patients and healthcare workers.

### **Are some people more at risk of getting CDI?**

Yes, some people are more at risk. These include the elderly, and people with a serious underlying illness such as cancer or renal disease, or other illnesses that require long courses of multiple antibiotics.



## How do hospitals prevent the spread of CDI?

Because the use of antibiotics is a risk factor for acquiring CDI, ensuring they are used appropriately and only when necessary is a very effective control measure.

Identifying patients in the early stages of this disease and introducing enhanced infection control measures helps to limit the spread of the spores in the environment. These measures include:

- > placing the patient in a single room and using gowns and gloves for all close contact
- > careful attention to hand hygiene, preferably using soap and water rather than alcohol-based hand rub, and
- > thorough environmental cleaning including use of a disinfectant that is active against spores, such as bleach.

## What happens when I am in hospital?

If you are suspected of having, or have been diagnosed with CDI, you will be placed in a single room, and your health care professional will use special infection control precautions as detailed above. You will remain in a single room until all your gastrointestinal symptoms have resolved.

## What about family and visitors when I am in hospital?

It is quite safe for you to have visitors, but they will be asked to wash their hands carefully before leaving your room. If they are helping in any aspect of your care, they may be asked to wear a gown and gloves.

## How can I prevent the spread of CDI when I go home?

Once you have recovered from CDI, there should be no risk to others. However, it is sensible that you follow these general hygiene precautions:

- > Wash your hands with soap and water and dry thoroughly, especially after going to the toilet or before preparing food.
- > Keep frequently touched surfaces such as benches, bathrooms and toilets clean.
- > Use your own towels and face cloths. Do not share these items with other people.

## What should I do if I have to go into hospital or receive health care in the community?

You should always inform the health care worker that you have had a CDI infection in the past, especially if you have similar symptoms. This will assist them to ensure that they provide the appropriate care for you.

## Where can I find more information on CDI?

You can speak with your Doctor or Health Professional or access more information from the following SA Health web pages:

- > Infection prevention and control: [www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/hospitalinfections](http://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/hospitalinfections)
- > "You've Got What?": [www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/youvegotwhat](http://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/youvegotwhat)

## For more information

Infection Control Service  
Communicable Disease Control Branch  
11 Hindmarsh Square  
Adelaide SA 5000  
Telephone: 1300 232 272

[www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/hospitalinfections](http://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/hospitalinfections)

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\*SA Health Safety and Quality Community Advisory Group



[www.ausgoal.gov.au/creative-commons](http://www.ausgoal.gov.au/creative-commons)



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