

What is clostridium difficile?

Clostridium difficile is a bacterium (germ) that lives harmlessly in the large intestine of around three per cent of healthy adults – although the percentage increases with age.

It rarely causes a problem in children or healthy adults as the normal bacterial population of the intestine keeps it in check.

It can cause a range of symptoms from mild diarrhoea to, in extreme cases, life-threatening disease due to inflammation in the intestine which is more likely to occur in the more elderly patients who have other health conditions.

In this situation the majority of patients totally recover following treatment.

What causes clostridium difficile?

As described above clostridium difficile can live harmlessly in the gut of patients but certain antibiotics can disturb the balance of the bacteria, which then allows clostridium difficile to multiply rapidly and produce toxins which cause illness.

It can also be picked up from other people, especially if they have recently had diarrhoea. Clostridium difficile infection is usually spread on the hands of people who have come into contact with infected patients or with contaminated environmental surfaces. This is why staff, visitors and patients need to wash their hands with soap and water and also why cleaning is very important.

The elderly are most at risk - over 80 per cent of cases are reported in the over 65 age group.

Can clostridium difficile be treated?

The treatment depends on how severe the diarrhoea is. Sometimes it will settle without treatment, especially if the patient had finished their course of antibiotics. If the patient is having frequent episodes of diarrhoea, then they maybe given different antibiotics, which will treat the infection.

Usually the symptoms settle slowly after one to five days.

To protect all our patients the Trust acts immediately a case is suspected. We do not wait for laboratory confirmation. A patient with symptoms is cared for in isolation.

How can we prevent the spread of clostridium difficile?

Handwashing with soap and water is important in stopping the spread of clostridium difficile – for staff, patients and visitors. Careful handwashing after using the toilet and before handling food and drink helps prevent the spread of the infection.

If you need any more information, or want to learn about Clostridium difficile, you may find these following internet sites useful:

Health Protection Agency - www.hpa.org.uk for advice and information

Department of Health - www.dh.gov.uk for information on the Government policy.

