

The Safe Patient

An educational patient safety series with free downloadable brochures, a service of The Patient Channel and Safe Care Campaign, in cooperation with the CDC

Safe Care: Understanding Clostridium difficile (C. diff)

During your hospital stay, you may be given several strong antibiotics to treat an infection, but these

- **antibiotics can sometimes kill off good bacteria in your digestive tract leaving other more harmful bacteria around. One of these potentially harmful bacteria is called Clostridium difficile or C. diff.** The main symptom of C. diff is diarrhea.

C. difficile is a bacteria that lives in the bowels of many patients, but when those patients, often very ill and in intensive care units, of necessity receive one, two, or even three antibiotics to cure their infections, the C. difficile seems to wake up in the bowel, begin to grow, and can cause a diarrheal infection in the bowel. Almost always, it's a complication of previous antibiotic therapy.

Health care workers taking care of other patients might pick up the bacteria from them. So to reduce your risk of contracting C difficile or any other infection it's important to **remind anyone who comes into**

- **your room to wash their hands. Washing with soap and water is important because C. difficile is not always effectively killed by hand gel sanitizers so in this case, good old tried and true soap and water hand hygiene helps get rid of the spores** by washing them down the drain.
- But C. diff can often linger in the environment and on surfaces like light switches and door handles in the hospital room and its very easy for hospital workers to pick up and carry it around on their clothes. **So hospital workers should always wear gowns and gloves when they care for a patient with C. difficile. Besides diarrhea, other symptoms of C difficile include abdominal pain and fever. Any of these symptoms should always be reported to your care staff.**

There are effective treatments for C. difficile; the important thing is prevention and secondly, to let hospital workers know the minute the patient develops potential symptoms.

