



## *Clostridium difficile* (*C. difficile*) – Frequently Asked Questions

### What is *C. difficile*?

*C. difficile* is one of the many types of bacteria that can be found in feces (bowel movement), and has been a known cause of health care-associated diarrhea for about 30 years.

### Where does *C. difficile* come from?

Although people may lately associate it with health care settings, it doesn't come from hospitals, long-term care homes or laboratories. It is widely distributed in the environment and can be found in the human intestine, occurring naturally in 3-5% of adults (more commonly in the elderly) without causing symptoms.

### What causes *C. difficile*?

*C. difficile* can be picked up on the hands from exposure in the environment and can get into the stomach once the mouth is touched, or if food is handled and then swallowed. Once in the stomach, the bacteria usually will not cause any problems unless the other bowel bacteria are disturbed, which can happen when antibiotics are taken. The use of antibiotics increases the chances of developing *C. difficile* diarrhea as it alters the normal level of good bacteria found in the intestines and colon. Without the presence of the normal bowel bacteria, the *C. difficile* bacteria may start to grow and produce a toxin that can damage the bowel and lead to watery diarrhea, fever and abdominal pain or tenderness.

### How does *C. difficile* spread?

When a person has *C. difficile*, the bacteria in their feces can contaminate surfaces such as toilets, bedpans, commode chairs, and door handles (if feces is on hands). Other healthy individuals can contaminate their hands if they touch these items. If these individuals then touch their mouths without washing their hands, they can become infected. *C. difficile* produces spores that survive for long periods and are resistant to destruction by many environmental factors (e.g. temperature, humidity).

## **Hand hygiene: everyone's responsibility**

Good hand hygiene is the **single-most effective** way to prevent the spread of infectious diseases like *C. difficile*. Healthcare staff, physicians, volunteers, patients, and visitors ALL have a role in maintaining a healthy environment.