What is Clostridium difficile?

Clostridium difficile (klo-STRID-ee-um dif-uh-SEEL) is a germ that affects the intestines. You may also hear it called C. diff. It causes diarrhea and cramps and can lead to more serious conditions such as colitis.

People in good health usually don’t get Clostridium difficile disease. Those who are at risk are the elderly and people who have other illnesses or conditions that require long-term use of antibiotics.

How is Clostridium difficile spread?

The Clostridium difficile germ is found in the stool (feces). People can become infected if they touch items or surfaces that are contaminated with stool and then touch their mouth or mucus membranes.

Anyone can spread the germ from infected people to others or to surfaces through their hands if they do not wash their hands after caring for someone who has C. diff. But, people who are hospitalized or on antibiotics are more likely to become ill from the germ.

What are the symptoms?

People with C. diff infection usually have watery diarrhea, fever, loss of appetite, nausea, and abdominal pain or tenderness. A toxin that is made by the C. diff germ causes these symptoms.

How is it diagnosed and treated?

A stool sample is usually sent to the laboratory to test for C. diff. Antibiotics that do not have many side effects are used to treat the condition.
How are others protected from C. diff at home?

It is important to keep the environment clean. Follow these safety precautions at home to reduce the chance of spreading C. diff to others:

- Wash your hands with soap and water, especially after using the bathroom and before eating.
- Scrub surfaces in bathrooms, kitchens, and other areas on a regular basis with household detergent and disinfectants. The C. diff germ spreads because it forms spores that are not easily killed by regular disinfection. It is important to scrub away the germ.

How are others protected at the medical center?

At University of Washington Medical Center, we place a “Contact Enteric Precautions” sign near the door of rooms of patients who have C. diff. This alerts health care workers and visitors to use extra precautions around the patient and when touching items in their room. Washing hands with soap and water is more effective than using hand gel to get rid of the C. diff germ after caring for patients.

What happens when I am in contact enteric precautions?

Enteric precautions are taken to prevent infections that spread through stool and vomit. Health care workers wear gowns and gloves when caring for you. Hand washing and keeping the environment clean are stressed.

You will be asked to stay in your room unless you need to go to other departments in the hospital for treatment. This is called being “in precautions.” If you go to other departments for tests or treatments, we will ask you to wash your hands and to wear a gown and gloves on the way there.

Please do not use the nutrition rooms while you are in precautions. When you want a snack or water, ask a member of your health care team to bring it to you.

When can the contact precautions be stopped?

When you no longer have diarrhea and are feeling better, a follow-up stool specimen will be sent to the laboratory. If the result shows that you are no longer infected, the precautions will be stopped.

If you no longer have symptoms after taking a full course of antibiotics, contact precautions may be stopped. Sometimes, if you still have diarrhea, another stool sample will be sent to the lab to check for C. diff.