What is Clostridium difficile infection (CDI)?

Clostridium difficile is the most commonly recognised cause of infectious diarrhoea in hospitalised patients. Clostridium difficile is a germ that can be found in the bowel. It was first recognised in the 1970's as a common cause of diarrhoea in hospitalised patients. In 2010, Australia reported a new type of Clostridium difficile. Since then the number of cases have increased.

This germ can survive for a long time outside the body, that’s why cleaning in hospitals is so important.

What are the symptoms?

The most common symptom is watery diarrhoea. People who have the germ may also feel sick, bloated, have a high temperature, tummy pain and don’t want to eat anything.

How do I get Clostridium difficile Infection?

By coming into contact with “dirty surfaces” (contaminated with faeces which you can’t see) and not washing your hands afterwards.

In hospital and residential care facilities (nursing homes), common “dirty surfaces” are toilet areas, door handles, hospital bed rails, ledges, the monkey bar that may hang over the bed, furniture, or basically any surface or item that people touch.

Sometimes the infection is brought on by antibiotics. Now and then the antibiotics you take may kill the good germs in your bowel and allow bad germs like Clostridium difficile to grow. This can lead to watery diarrhoea.

How is it spread?

Hospitals and other health care services such as residential care facilities (nursing homes) are areas where the germ is more likely to live and spread because the people in them may be sick, elderly, on antibiotics, or may not be able to control their bowels. They are likely to touch lots of surfaces that may become “dirty” around their bed area. This may happen when:

- they are walking (with or without a carer)
- Sitting in a chair that may or may not have access to a table
- Or being transported around the area or facility.

Healthcare workers can also spread the infection by not cleaning their hands between patients or after touching “dirty surfaces” or things like dirty clothes.

Are some people at a greater risk?

The risk of Clostridium difficile infection is increased in people who are:

- On antibiotics
- Elderly
- In hospital or residential care facility (nursing home) for a long time
- Very sick because they have more than one illness
• People who recently have had bowel procedures that involved surgery
• Not able to fight infection naturally¹.

Is it treatable?
Yes. People who have the condition need to be under the care of a Doctor.

How can I protect myself and my family?
• Wash your hands with soap and water after using the toilet, before eating or handling food, after handling rubbish or touching a common (communal) surface.
• Don’t expect your Doctor to prescribe antibiotics every time you are not feeling well. Only take them as ordered by your doctor.
• Avoid preparing food for others while you have diarrhoea.
• Do not share personal hygiene items (such as towels, face cloths and tooth brushes) with others.
• If you have diarrhoea, you should clean the toilet bowl, toilet seat and toilet flush handle with a cleaning agent after using the toilet.
• Drink plenty of fluids to help prevent dehydration if you have diarrhoea.
• Ask your family and friends not to visit while you are unwell or if they are unwell².

What are healthcare facilities doing to prevent Clostridium difficile?
All healthcare workers should be:
• Cleaning their hands before and after caring for every patient.
• Carefully cleaning rooms and equipment that have been used for patients with Clostridium difficile.
• Using contact precautions (wearing aprons/gowns and gloves) to prevent Clostridium difficile spreading to other patients.
• Only giving patients antibiotics when necessary².

What should I do if I’m visiting someone in hospital?
• Wash your hands before touching the person you are visiting and again when you leave.
• Do not sit on hospital beds.

References
2. United States. Centers for Disease Control (CDC), Frequently asked questions-Clostridium difficile.