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health and wellness

PRACTICE CLEANLINESS, PREVENT INFECTION

C. DIFFICILE AND HOW PROPER HAND WASHING COULD SAVE YOUR LIFE

BY GUNN KATHERMAN

Part of its name comes from the Latin for "difficult," which accurately describes how life can be when you're suffering from an infection of *Clostridium difficile*.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Clostridium difficile* (also referred to as C. difficile or C. diff) is a bacterium that causes diarrhea and more serious conditions such as colitis, the inflammation of the colon.

Once in your intestines, the bacterium is capable of causing anything from mild diarrhea to life-threatening colitis.

C. difficile has plagued the life of Bobbie Smith, a Kansas City resident and site administrator for diffsupport.com, an online support group.

In 1979, one year after the bacterium was discovered, Smith's 4-year-old son contracted C. difficile as a result of taking amoxicillin for a prolonged period of time to treat several illnesses. Fourteen years later, at the age of 52, Smith had an upper respiratory infection and received antibiotics as a treatment, she then contracted pneumonia and received more antibiotics until she was finally hospitalized with sinusitis, pneumonia and C. difficile.

Smith suffered from C. difficile for four years after she first contracted the disease in 1993, and it wasn't until 1997 that she finally felt cured. The relief was short-lived, and she relapsed in 1999.

Smith's story once considered rare, is now something 500,000 people in the United States can relate to every year.

THE CAUSES OF C. DIFFICILE

Several factors play a role in the development of C. difficile. The large intestine houses a lot of good bacteria, which help protect your body from infection. When you are taking antibiotics to treat an infection, the good forms of bacteria are destroyed in addition to the harmful bacteria.

"Antibiotics tend to decrease the normal flora of the gut," says Gayle Whitmore, RN and infection control coordinator at Heartland Spine & Specialty Hospital. As a result, an environment is created in which C. difficile can flourish.

C. difficile is virtually everywhere, but it is most commonly found in hospitals and nursing homes. The C. difficile bacteria can be passed through fecal contamination.

"If I have it and I don't wash my hands after using the bathroom, then I can spread it to someone else, or they can pick it up from anything I've touched."


— GAYLE WHITMORE, RN, INFECTION CONTROL COORDINATOR AT HEARTLAND SPINE AND SPECIALTY HOSPITAL




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EFFECTIVE HANDWASHING

7 Steps to Prevent the Spread of Germs



hand washing tips

"I think the answer is hygiene," Smith says. "Make everyone responsible for washing their hands. Don't be shy about asking the medical professionals to wash their hands."

- Do not use antibacterial gels or alcohol-based wipes as these are not effective against spore-producing bacteria like C. difficile.
- Wet your hands with warm, running water and apply liquid or clean bar soap. Lather well.
- Rub your hands vigorously together for at least 15 to 20 seconds (you should be able to sing "Happy Birthday" twice).
- Scrub all surfaces, including the backs of your hands, wrists, between your fingers and under your fingernails.
- Rinse well.
- Dry your hands with a clean or disposable towel.

possibility of another infection very high. "Once you have C. difficile, you're always at risk again," Smith says. "I like to call it the gift that keeps on giving."

PREVENTION

It's just a matter of cleanliness.

"In almost all of the studies done in hospitals nationwide there has been cross-contamination, generally by health care workers themselves," Swenson says. Here are the APIC's recommendations for preventing C. difficile's transmission:

- Wash hands with soap and water, especially after using the restroom and before eating.
- Clean bathroom and kitchen surfaces on a regular basis with one cup bleach to 10 cups of water daily to prevent the spread of the bacteria.
- Do not share a toilet with a person who has C. difficile.
- Reduce unnecessary use of antibiotics. Don't demand antibiotics for every cold or sniffle as these are usually caused by viruses, and antibiotics do not kill viruses. Ask your health care provider if antibiotics are necessary, if they are still prescribed, be sure to follow the instruction and take the full course as directed.

COIFFSUPPORT.COM

Smith says it is difficult to cope with the constant physical, mental and financial traumas of C. difficile. As one of the site administrators on diffsupport.com, Smith wants to help people deal with the overall stress C. difficile creates.

"C. diff is going to affect your life, but you can't let it ruin your life. It's an ugly disease because it's very unpredictable. And doctors truly don't understand that much about it," Smith says.

"The C. difficile support site posts studies, new information, media reports and advice for people suffering from C. difficile. It also serves as a forum where people can ask questions and discuss their conditions with others who understand what they are going through.

"It's a disease that you'll never understand unless you have it," Smith says. ■

SYMPTOMS

- Diarrhea (at least three bowel movements per day for two or more days)
- Fever
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Abdominal pain/tenderness

In the worst cases of C. difficile, patients experience the extreme of these symptoms. However, in some cases the symptoms are so mild that the bacterium can go undetected, or be misdiagnosed as irritable bowel syndrome.