Fact Sheet: Clostridium Difficile (C. difficile)

What is Clostridium Difficile?
C. Difficile is a spore-forming bacterium that causes diarrhea and more serious conditions affecting the bowel such as colitis. It produces two exotoxins: toxin A and toxin B. C. difficile may also cause a serious blood infection and potentially death. It is rare to have C. difficile that is not associated with antibiotic therapy during healthcare treatment. C. difficile can be isolated from the soil and is commonly present in the environment.

What are the symptoms?
- Watery diarrhea (at least 3 loose stools per day for 2 or more days)
- Fever
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Abdominal pain or tenderness

How is the disease treated?
In about 20% of patients, C. difficile infection will resolve within 2-3 days of discontinuing antibiotic treatment. It is generally treated with a 10-day course of a different antibiotic.

How is it spread?
People who have other illnesses, have been on antibiotics frequently or for an extended period of time, and the elderly are more likely to get C. difficile. As the bacteria is shed in feces C. difficile spores can live outside the human body for a very long time and may be found on things in the environment such as bed linens, bathroom fixtures, and medical equipment. People can become infected by touching items or surfaces contaminated with feces and then touching their mouths or other mucus membranes such as eyes or nose. Health care workers can spread the disease by not practicing good hand washing techniques.

How is it prevented?
Infected people can spread it to others. Usually, people who are hospitalized or on frequent antibiotics are likely to become ill. You can reduce the chance of spreading the disease by:
- Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water, especially after using the bathroom, so as to remove the C. difficile spores.
- Clean surfaces in bathrooms, kitchens, and other frequently used areas on a regular basis with household disinfectants.
- Limit the use of antibiotics.
If you think you have C. difficile, see your health care provider.

Other resources:
GI Infection in the Health Care Settings
www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dhq/id_gi.html
Information for Health Care Providers
www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dhqp/id_cdifffaq_hcp.html

Visit our website at: http://publichealth.eWashtenaw.org
Or the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention at: www.cdc.gov
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