

Messenger Post Newspaper

## HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Senior Care

Dr. Karyn Leible, Sr. Vice-President, Jewish Senior *Life*

### **C. diff: A growing and preventable concern**

*Published August 1, 2013*

Few people who go into the hospital do so thinking they may end up sicker than they initially were. As strains of C. diff become more and more virulent, however, this becomes a reality for thousands of Americans in hospitals and long-term care centers each year. Clostridium difficile, more commonly known as C. diff, can infect up to 500,000 Americans per year, with 94 percent of infections beginning in healthcare settings. The disease is linked to more than 30,000 deaths a year in the U.S. – just shy of the 32,000 yearly deaths in traffic accidents.

The human gut is full of bacteria, including C. diff. For most of us, it resides quietly through our lives while we're healthy, infection suppressed by other bacteria. These other bacteria can be destroyed, however, by prolonged use of strong antibiotics, leaving the C. diff behind to multiply and overtake any remaining, weaker bacteria. This infection usually begins with severe diarrhea, due to a toxin that the C. diff bacteria forms, and can develop into life-threatening colon inflammation.

Though people of any age are susceptible to the infection, it affects a significant number of seniors annually as they often need to take antibiotics for a sustained period of time or are more likely to have recurrent hospitalizations. Americans over 65 years of age are 10 times more likely to become infected. Mild symptoms are treatable, but the infection becomes exponentially more threatening as antibiotic use is prolonged.

Hand-to-hand contact is the most common way to spread the bacteria, but C. diff forms spores that can also live on cart handles, bedrails, bedside tables, toilets, sinks, stethoscopes, thermometers – even telephones and remote controls. Healthcare employees and patients alike handle these surfaces daily, and from there, it's often only a matter of time before the bacterial spore is transmitted to the gut through the mouth.

Though C. diff is treatable in many cases, 25 percent of those who have been infected will get infected again in the future. In the case of C. diff, prevention is far more important than treatment, as many healthcare facilities have the tools to keep infections at bay.

How can we prevent these infections? First, with the tried-and-true method your parents have been telling you about for years—washing your hands. Frequent hand-washing with soap and warm water before and after touching any surface in a hospital or long-term care center will help prevent the spread of infection. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers have not been as effective in killing the bacterial spores, so do not use them as a soap substitute unless soap and water is not immediately available. Keep all surfaces, especially bathrooms, thoroughly cleaned with products containing chlorine bleach. Most important is to avoid unnecessary antibiotics. While it may seem like you need an antibiotic to alleviate symptoms of a viral infection—like so many upper respiratory infections are—

antibiotics are not effective for viral infections and overuse of antibiotics only increases your risk of developing a C. diff infection.

Our most essential tool in fighting the infection is staying educated about it. For loved ones in the hospital or long-term care, be sure all proper precautions are taken for this sometimes fatal – but often completely preventable – infection.

*Karyn Leible, M.D., is the Senior Vice President of Medical Services and Chief Medical Officer for Jewish Senior Life. She is also Past President of the American Medical Directors Association, and is Board Certified in Internal Medicine and Geriatrics.*