

You can take some simple steps to avoid infection

A Hospital Germ on the Warpath

By Betsy McCaughey

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Grace Voros was 85 and enjoying life, watching her family grow and taking romantic walks with the man she fell in love with 61 years ago, when she took a minor fall. She went to the hospital for an x-ray, where tests confirmed she had no broken bones. But while there, she contracted an infection no one in the family had ever heard about, “C. diff,” and died.

C. diff, short for *Clostridium difficile*, is raging through hospitals, infecting hundreds of thousands of patients a year. The bacteria contaminate every surface, including bed rails, bed tables, nurses’ uniforms, privacy curtains, faucets and call buttons. When patients touch these surfaces and then pick up food without washing their hands, they ingest the germ. Any patient taking antibiotics who ingests C. diff is in danger of developing severe diarrhea, leading to dehydration, inflammation of the colon and even death.

Routine cleaning isn’t enough to protect you from C. diff. Researchers at Case Western Reserve and the Cleveland VA Medical Center found that after routine cleaning at a hospital, 78 percent of surfaces were still contaminated. To kill the germ, you need to use bleach.

When surfaces are not properly disinfected, the results can be deadly. At Thomas Jefferson Medical Center in Philadelphia, three consecutive patients occupying the same room came down with C. diff. One died.

Staffs at many U.S. hospitals are woefully uninformed about what to do. One study reported that 39 percent of medical personnel didn’t know that C. diff could be spread on stethoscopes, blood pressure cuffs and other equipment. About two-thirds of medical staff

were unaware they should clean their hands with soap and water, because alcohol sanitizers don’t kill this superbug.

What can you do to protect yourself? Insist that everyone treating you clean their hands before touching you.

Clean your own hands thoroughly before eating. Do not touch your hands to your lips. Do not place your food or utensils on any surface except your plate. Ask family to bring wipes containing bleach to clean the items around your bed.

When you leave the hospital, assume any belongings you bring home are contaminated. Do not mix clothes from the hospital with the family wash; wash with bleach. Regular laundry detergents do not kill C. diff.

If you are visiting someone in the hospital, be careful about eating in the cafeteria or a restaurant where the staff go in their scrubs or uniforms. These uniforms could be covered in invisible superbugs. More than 20 percent of nurses’ uniforms had C. diff on them at the end of a workday, according to one study. Imagine sliding into a restaurant booth after a nurse has left the germ on the table or the seat. You could easily pick it up on your hands and then ingest it with your sandwich.

Poor hospital hygiene and lax practices such as wearing scrubs in public are putting all of us at risk. That’s why I founded RID, the Committee to Reduce Infection Deaths, so that other families won’t have to go through what Grace Voros’ family suffered.



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