

Microbiology Nuts & Bolts: Session 3: Gastrointestinal Infections

Aims & Objectives

- To know how to diagnose and manage life-threatening infections
- To know how to diagnose and manage common infections
- To understand how to interpret basic microbiology results
- To have a working knowledge of how antibiotics work
- To understand the basics of infection control

www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk



- 30-40% of patients admitted to hospital will receive an antibiotic
- It is critical to pick out those with life-threatening conditions in order to manage them appropriately and correctly in order to give them the best chance of survival
- It is also important to know how to diagnose and manage common infections so that complications do not occur and patients get better as quickly as possible
- Knowing about antibiotics ensures the correct ones are used for the correct indications, prevents prescribing errors and keeps patients safe
- Everyone working in a healthcare setting has a responsibility to protect patients from harm including cross infection from other patients

Harry

- 87 years old
- Abdominal pain
- On examination
 - Temperature 37.5 °C
 - B.P. 130/75
- Penicillin allergic
- Diagnosed with probable UTI started Ciprofloxacin

www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk



- A vague history but allows the process of diagnosing the patient to begin
- There are non-infectious reasons for abdominal pain therefore it is important not to become too fixated on a diagnosis without considering all possibilities, especially when the temperature is within normal range
- All doctors should know the limitations of the tests they do including basic observations not just laboratory tests
- Normal temperature is 36.5°C to 37.5°C
 - Often a tympanic temperature which is actually a peripheral temperature not a core temperature
 - Can vary from core by up to +/- 1°C
 - Works by infrared looking at the tympanic membrane therefore any obstruction in the ear can lead to a false temperature result
- One off values of blood pressure can be valuable if very abnormal but trends are usually more informative and knowing if the patient is normally hypo/hypertensive (helps to look at the medications)
- After emergency care (ABC) the next step is to take a full history and perform an examination in order to produce a differential diagnosis
- In this case we do not know the cause of Harry's pain, what the nature of his allergy is and therefore whether the choice of antibiotic is appropriate or not

Questions to ask yourself...

- What urgent care does he need?
- Does he have an infection?
- What is the likely source of infection?
- What are the likely causes of the infection?
- Have you got time to pursue a diagnosis or do you need to treat him now?
- How are you going to investigate him?
- When will you review him?

All of the above is based on your differential diagnosis

www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk



- If Harry is septic then he needs urgent care, for every hour delay in giving effective treatment the mortality increases by 7% up to approximately 40% by 6 hours
- If he is very unwell then he will need frequent and regular review in order to ensure he is improving or to spot any deterioration as early as possible
- The differential diagnosis is a list of possible reasons for a patient's illness which can then be narrowed down through careful questioning, examination and investigation until a single unifying diagnosis is proven
- In this case we have no evidence that Harry is very unwell and it would probably have been better to try and work out what was going on before rushing in with antibiotics

Differential Diagnosis

- Immediately life-threatening
 - Perforated intra-abdominal viscus, pancreatitis...
- Common
 - Urinary tract infection (UTI), cholecystitis, cholangitis, diverticulitis, gastroenteritis...
- Uncommon
- How would you investigate this differential diagnosis?

www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk



- Formulating a differential diagnosis appears to be going out of fashion but it is essential if diagnoses are not to be missed
- A systems approach (e.g. respiratory, cardiac, Gastrointestinal, genitourinary, neurological, skin, bone, joint, etc) can be fitted to a template of life-threatening, common, uncommon in order to complete the differential but considering the life-threatening first ensures these are dealt with as early as possible
- It is not a static process but can change throughout a patients management as new information becomes available and their clinical condition changes

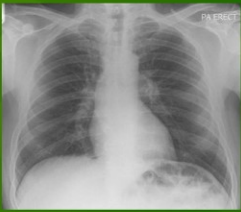
- Bloods
 - FBC, CRP, U&Es, LFTs, Amylase
- Urine
 - Point-of-care +/- laboratory
- Stool
 - Culture & sensitivity
- Chest X-ray

www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk



- It is essential to know the normal values of all tests within your hospital
- Full blood count (FBC)
 - The total white blood cell count can go up or down in infection
 - The differential white blood cell count can help to point to the type of organism but nothing is 100% (neutrophils = bacteria/fungi, lymphocytes = viruses, eosinophils = parasites)
 - Platelets are an acute phase reactant and go up in infection (they can go down in severe infections when disseminated intravascular coagulation DIC develops)
- CRP (C reactive protein)
 - Produced in liver in response to inflammation, often goes up in bacterial infection
 - >200 usually significant, otherwise need to know what the trend is i.e. increasing, decreasing
 - Beware, patients in liver failure do not produce much CRP – use other markers of liver synthetic function to guide you e.g. INR, Albumin
- Urea & Electrolytes (U&Es)
 - Antibiotics can only be prescribed safely if the patients kidney function is known
- Liver Function Tests and Amylase
 - These are essential to investigate for possible biliary infection or pancreatitis, both of which may require antibiotics or specific surgical management
- Urine point of care includes a dipstick test
 - Leucocytes indicate the presence of white blood cells and hence inflammation in the urinary tract
 - Bacterial nitrites are breakdown products from the action of bacteria on Urea and indicate the presence of bacteria
 - Urine samples are prone to contamination so it is important to advise patients how to take a proper MSU
 - Part the labia or retract the foreskin, void the first part of the urine stream and discard, then catch the middle part of the stream.
 - The first part of the urine is prone to bacterial contamination from the urethra giving false positive results
- Chest X-ray is required by the British Thoracic Society in order to diagnose pneumonia in hospital

- Bloods
 - WBC $13 \times 10^9/L$
 - CRP 45
 - U&Es - Urea 7, Creat 131
- Urine
 - Dipstick ++ leucs, ++ nitrites
 - Microscopy $<10 \times 10^6/L$ WBC, no epithelial cells
- How would you manage Harry now?




www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk

- Patient has only slightly raised high white blood cells and CRP, which are non-specific and are not consistent with an acute bacterial infection
- U&Es shows a degree of renal failure and may make antibiotic dosing problematic
- The urine contains leucocytes and bacterial nitrites which has a low positive predictive value of 60%, i.e. the patient may have a UTI but formal microscopy with or without culture is required to investigate further
 - The normal white blood cell count on microscopy makes a diagnosis of UTI unlikely
 - The absence of squamous epithelial cells suggests the urine has not been in contact with the skin of the perineum making contamination less likely
- This chest X-ray is normal, and in particular given the history of abdominal pain there is no air under the diaphragm to indicate a perforated viscus
- At this point in time there is little to support a diagnosis of infection

2 Days Later

- Diarrhoea, abdominal pain, nausea
- Bloods
 - WBC $21 \times 10^9/L$
 - CRP 145
 - U&Es - Urea 23, Creat 257
- Stool
 - Liquid, unformed
- What's the likely diagnosis?
- How would you manage Harry now?



www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk

- Harry is now becoming very unwell
- In addition to new nausea and diarrhoea his blood tests now show an inflammatory response and acute renal failure
- The abdominal X-ray shows dilated loops of large bowel, a condition known as megacolon
- There are very few causes of megacolon, the most likely in this case is Clostridium difficile because the patient is elderly and has been given a high risk antibiotic, Ciprofloxacin
- Harry needs a senior review, his Ciprofloxacin should be stopped immediately and he should be started on treatment for C. difficile even though otherwise he should be kept nil by mouth
- He should be isolated in a side-room in order to protect other patients
- He will need supportive care with fluids and he should be assessed by a surgeon

How to interpret a stool result?

- Appearance
 - Formed, Semi-formed, Unformed....
- Routine testing
 - Outpatients or new admissions:
 - Microscopy
 - Cryptosporidium oocysts
 - Culture
 - Salmonella, Shigella, Campylobacter, E. coli O157
 - Other
 - Clostridium difficile toxin (CDT) (>65 years)
 - Inpatients
 - Clostridium difficile toxin

www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk

- As with other tests it is important to have a system for looking at microbiology results
 - Stool samples are first assessed to see if the patient actually has loose stool
 - Microscopy will indicate if a parasite has been seen
 - Culture will indicate if one of the common bacterial causes of diarrhoea has been isolated or not
- Too many patients get treated for what is essentially normal flora and this is a mistake!
- The most crucial information on the request is the clinical details as this dictates what tests are done and also protects the laboratory staff handling the pure cultures from the specimen
 - If you say the patient has been abroad then the lab staff may look for Cholera as well as taking care not to acquire typhoid or paratyphoid themselves

Microscopy of urine

- White blood cells
 - > 100 x10⁶/L definitely significant
 - > 10 x10⁶/L significant if properly taken MSU (rare!)
- Red Blood Cells
 - Poor correlation with UTI, used by urologist and renal physicians
- Epithelial cells
 - Indicator of contact with, and therefore contamination from, the perineum

www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk



- A high WBC in the urine is consistent with a UTI but other systemic inflammatory conditions can give rise to pyuria e.g. pneumonia, appendicitis, etc
- The presence of epithelial cells in a urine sample indicates that the urine has not been taken correctly and has been in contact with the skin of the perineum with the risk that anything that has grown may actually be a contaminant from the perineal flora
- Positive bacterial culture in the presence of epithelial cells or the absence of white blood cells is consistent with possible contamination and should be regarded with caution when planning patient treatments (it may be better to repeat these samples with a carefully taken specimen)

Bristol Stool Chart

Bristol Stool Chart	
Type 1	Separate hard lumps, like nuts (hard to pass)
Type 2	Sausage-shaped but lumpy
Type 3	Like a sausage but with cracks on the surface
Type 4	Like a sausage or snake, smooth and soft
Type 5	Soft blobs with clear-cut edges
Type 6	Fully formed with ragged edges, a mushy stool
Type 7	Watery, no solid pieces, Entirely Liquid

www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk



- It may sound like an odd thing to do but the development of the Bristol Stool Chart has made a major impact on the management of diarrhoea
- It provides an objective classification of whether a stool sample can be graded as liquid or not
- Types 6 and 7 are those that concern us the most

How is stool processed?

- Testing is decided by clinical information
- Selective and indicator media
 - Stool is 1/3 bacteria dry weight!
- CDT same day
- Cryptosporidium 24-48 hours
- Culture 48-96 hours
- Increasing use of PCR
 - Same day testing
 - Secondary culture for sensitivities



www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk



- Stool samples are technically the most demanding samples sent to a microbiology laboratory
- The laboratory are trying to find particular pathogenic strains of bacteria amongst what is about 1/3rd dry weight bacteria of a similar appearance
- It helps if the lab have an idea of what they might be looking for and clinical details are essential for this
 - The lab do not routinely look for all pathogens but are guided by the clinical history, especially the travel history e.g. if travelled to India they will look for Cholera etc
- The clinical details also help protect the lab from potentially dangerous pathogens which are easily acquired when grown in pure culture e.g. typhoid, paratyphoid
- Culture can take up to 96 hours for some bacteria such as Campylobacter sp. which are fastidious and slow growing
- Many laboratories are now using PCR to detect gastrointestinal pathogens, with culture only being performed on those positive for bacteria by PCR
- PCR is more sensitive than culture

Culture: how is stool processed?

- Prolonged course
 - Ova, cyst and parasites (OCP) e.g. Giardia, worms etc
- Foreign Travel
 - Typhoid and Paratyphoid (High Risk)
 - Ova, cyst and parasites (OCP)
 - Vibrio sp. e.g. cholera
- Outbreaks
 - Viruses e.g. Norovirus, rotavirus, adenovirus etc

www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk

- The types of organisms that commonly cause gastrointestinal infections are commonly viruses, bacteria and parasites
- The speed of onset is usually fast for viruses and bacterial toxins and slightly longer for other bacteria
- Parasites often give prolonged symptoms
- Outbreaks in the developed world are often caused by viruses which are highly infectious and not readily killed by alcohol hand gels
 - There are 10 million infectious doses of virus in each gram of stool from a patient with Norovirus or rotavirus

Causes of diarrhoea

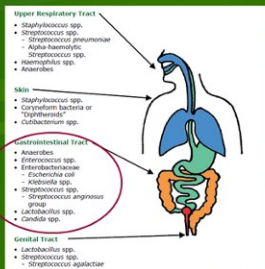


All acquired by faecal-oral route!

www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk

- Whilst there are many organisms that can cause gastrointestinal infection, what they all have in common is that they are acquired by the faecal oral route
- The pictures are:
 - Left – top Cholera, bottom E. coli O157
 - Middle – top Adenovirus, bottom Norovirus
 - Right – top Giardia, bottom Ascaris (roundworm)

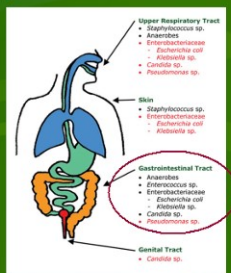
Community Normal Flora



www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk

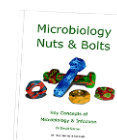
- The normal flora of a human body consists of 10^{14} bacteria (that's approximately 15,000 times the number of humans on the Earth!)
- Knowing the common bacteria that colonise the human body allows:
 - Prediction of the causes of infection from any body site because 85% of infections are caused by the patients own flora getting in to a site it should not be e.g. UTI caused by bacteria from the gastrointestinal tract
 - Prediction of the origin of an infection when a bacteria is found in a normally sterile site e.g. E. coli in blood cultures from either urine, bowel or Biliary tract

Hospital Normal Flora



www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk

- The normal flora of a patient changes in hospital around 4 days after admission



Factors Affecting Normal Flora


- Exposure to antibiotics provides a selective pressure
 - e.g. “4Cs” Ciprofloxacin, Clindamycin, Cephalosporins, Co-amoxiclav predispose to *Clostridium difficile*
- Increased antimicrobial resistant organisms in the environment
 - e.g. *Clostridium difficile* is resistant to the “4Cs”
- Easily transmissible organisms
 - e.g. Norovirus, *Clostridium difficile* etc
- Immunosuppressants
 - e.g. Steroids, chemotherapy, abdominal surgery etc

www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk 

- There are many circumstances that can affect a patient's normal flora
- Understanding how this happens can allow predictions to be made as to how the flora will change and therefore how this will influence the types of bacteria causing infections
- Antibiotics will tend to remove sensitive bacteria from the flora leaving the resistant ones behind or allowing resistant ones to colonise
 - This is how antibiotics predispose to *Clostridium difficile* infection
 - *C. difficile* is resistant to the antibiotics which predispose to it and so is able to exploit the ecological niche left behind by the antibiotic
 - *C. difficile* then starts to produce toxins which cause the diarrhoea
 - The highest risk antibiotics at the moment are known as the “4 Cs”
 - Ciprofloxacin (and the quinolones)
 - Clindamycin
 - Cephalosporins
 - Co-amoxiclav

Back to Harry

- Diarrhoea, abdominal pain, nausea
- Bloods
 - WBC $21 \times 10^9/L$
 - CRP 145
 - U&Es – Urea 23, Creat 257
- Stool
 - Liquid, unformed
 - Testing confirms *Clostridium difficile* toxin present
- Abdominal X-ray
 - Dilatation of bowel, megacolon
- What's the diagnosis?
- How would you manage Harry now?

www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk 

- Harry stool tests positive for *Clostridium difficile* toxin and so his diagnosis is Toxic Megacolon secondary to *Clostridium difficile*
- This is severe *C. difficile* and so in addition to the measures mentioned earlier the antibiotic choice to treat him is normally PO Vancomycin 125mg QDS
- Severity markers are presented later but in this case they are:
 - His age
 - High white cell count and CRP
 - The presence of toxic megacolon

Types of gastrointestinal infection

- Gastroenteritis
 - Viral diarrhoea & vomiting e.g. Norovirus, Rotavirus
 - Preformed toxin mediated food poisoning e.g. *Staphylococcus aureus*, *Bacillus cereus*
 - Toxin produced in gut e.g. *Clostridium difficile*
 - Bacterial e.g. *Campylobacter*, *Salmonella*, *Shigella*, *E. coli* O157
- Parasites
 - e.g. *Cryptosporidium parvum*, *Ascaris lumbricoides*, *Giardia lamblia*
- Other
 - Diverticulitis, cholangitis, cholecystitis, liver abscess, appendicitis...

www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk 

- There are many gastrointestinal tract related infections and only detailed history taking and targeted investigations can separate them

Do patients need antibiotics?

- Some bacterial infections do not need antibiotics e.g. urethral syndrome, gastroenteritis
- Viruses do not respond to antibacterials!
 - However there are antivirals e.g. aciclovir, oseltamivir etc
- There are many non-infection reasons for "signs" of infections e.g. pyuria, raised CRP, crackles in the chest etc
- The presence of bacteria does not necessarily mean there is an infection!
 - Bacteria colonise, such as upper respiratory tract, surgical wounds, ulcers

www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk



- Over treatment with antimicrobials is a common and serious problem
- There are a number of common reasons for this:
 - The patient does not have a bacterial infection
 - Clinical signs are over interpreted
 - Treatment is trying to target normal flora
- Many of these instances can be avoided by carefully considering the patient and their results before deciding to treat

Gastroenteritis requiring antimicrobials

- Clostridium difficile
- Typhoid & Paratyphoid
- Parasites e.g. Giardia lamblia
- *Almost all others require supportive care only!*

www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk



- Most gastrointestinal infections do not require antibiotic treatment
- The exceptions are:
 - Clostridium difficile – where treatment reduces morbidity and mortality as well as the duration of symptoms and the risk of transmission to others
 - Typhoid & paratyphoid – which are actually systemic infections associated with a high mortality and are usually treated with either Ceftriaxone or Ciprofloxacin
 - Parasites – which often tend to cause chronic infections and nutritional problems if not eliminated

Management of Clostridium difficile

- Isolate the patient
- Supportive care e.g. "drip & suck"
- Stop the causative antibiotic
 - The 4 C's
 - Cephalosporins, Clindamycin, Ciprofloxacin, Co-amoxiclav
 - If antibiotics still required discuss with a microbiologist
- Stop unnecessary proton pump inhibitors
- Assess for severity
- Treatment
 - Mild/Moderate PO Metronidazole 400mg TDS 10-14 days
 - Severe PO Vancomycin 125mg QDS 10-14 days

www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk



- All patients with Clostridium difficile should be reviewed urgently by a Doctor and assessed for severity of disease
- Supportive care with IV fluids, nasogastric tube placement with aspiration then free drainage and making the patient "nil by mouth" are important emergency management strategies
- They should be isolated in a side-room and protective isolation implemented
- The offending antimicrobial should be stopped or discussed with a Microbiologist
- They should be started on appropriate treatment for the severity
- If severe it is a good idea to get a gastroenterology or surgical assessment urgently

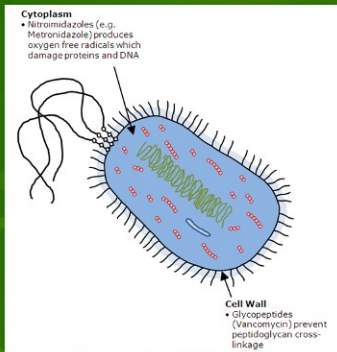
Assessment of severity of CDAD

- Assess severity
 - Age >85 years
 - WBC > 15 or < 1.5
 - Rising creatinine
 - Temperature > 38.5 °C
 - Signs of colitis
 - Colonic dilatation on CT scan
 - AICU
 - Immunosuppressed



www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk

- Clostridium difficile is a potentially life threatening infection which needs careful management



www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk

- The mechanisms of action of antibiotics causes a lot of confusion (and the similarity of names makes it even worse – anything ending in “mycin” is derived from a fungus and has nothing to do with the class of the bacteria!)
- It can be helpful to split them into groups as this at least reduces the list to a more manageable size:
 - Mainly act on the cell wall
 - If no cell wall or unable to penetrate Gram-negative cell membrane to cell wall then no activity i.e. glycopeptides have no Gram-negative activity (Clostridium difficile is a Gram-positive bacillus)
 - Some other individual action
 - Metronidazole is a nitroimidazole which kills anaerobic bacteria by producing oxygen free radicals which they are unable to deal with and which therefore interact with intracellular processes

Other considerations

- Are there any contraindications and cautions?
 - e.g. oral metronidazole and alcoholics
- Is your patient allergic to any antibiotics?
 - e.g. allergy to metronidazole and vancomycin is rare but can happen
- What are the potential side effects of the antibiotic?
 - e.g. Metronidazole can cause pancreatitis and hepatitis
- What monitoring of your patient do you have to do?
 - e.g. Metronidazole and liver function

www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk

- Patients given metronidazole should be warned about the harmful interaction with alcohol
 - Metronidazole causes a disulfiram-like reaction with alcohol which can be potentially fatal
- It always worth checking if a patient is allergic to whatever drug you are going to give them although be sure they are describing an allergy not just a recognised side-effect
- Some antibiotics have common or severe side effects and doctors should be familiar with these and warn patients about them, as part of the informed consent to treatment process
- Many antibiotics also require monitoring for these side effects and this should be checked in the BNF at the time of prescribing

Back to Harry

- Ciprofloxacin stopped
- Commenced on oral Vancomycin 125mg QDS
- Stool sample, confirms *Clostridium difficile* associated disease (CDAD)
- Abdomen worsens, developed free gas under diaphragm
- Laparotomy with colectomy and ileostomy

www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk 

- The Ciprofloxacin is stopped because it is almost certain that it has predisposed him to *Clostridium difficile* associated disease and if it continues he will continue to get worse
- Oral Vancomycin is started for what is a severe infection
- Harry has progressed to one of the consequences of severe *C. difficile* infection with perforation of his bowel requiring surgery

- Despite ongoing aggressive management including intensive care support Harry died 3 days later
- What is the root cause for why Harry got CDAD?
- Whose fault is it?

www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk 

- This is a disaster
- Harry came in with one problem and as a result of his treatment he died
- Root Cause Analysis (RCA) is the process by which we investigate incidents and errors in order to see if there are lessons which can be learnt to prevent them happening again (there can be more than one)
- In this case the root causes are:
 - Inadequate history, examination and investigation to find the cause of his symptoms
 - Incomplete history of allergy to decide if Harry really was allergic to penicillin
 - Unjustifiable use of a high risk antibiotic in a high risk patient
- In terms of who is responsible in this case it is likely to be the Doctor who initially managed the patient incorrectly as well as the Senior who reviewed the patient the next day

What are the common Root Causes?

- Inappropriate (or appropriate) choice of antibiotic e.g. quinolones, clindamycin, cephalosporins
- Transmission of spores e.g. hand hygiene, environmental cleaning
- Prolonged courses of antibiotics
- Multiple courses of antibiotics
- Failure to isolate suspected cases quickly enough

However, antibiotics DO NOT CAUSE *Clostridium difficile* disease they PREDISPOSE to it!

- RCA is a powerful tool if used correctly leading to real change to prevent recurrences of problems

What must we do?

- Strict attention to infection control policy
 - Hand hygiene, bare below the elbows, cleaning, isolation etc
- Careful (defensible) use of antimicrobials
 - Stop/Review dates } Empower ward staff
 - Indications } to control usage
 - Guidelines
- All accept that this is our responsibility

www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk



- Infection control is the responsibility of everyone who works in the health service at every level
- Everyone has a responsibility to protect our patients from harm, including the acquisition of infections within the hospital or other healthcare settings
- Hand hygiene is the single most important aspect of this process (for gastroenteritis this should be with soap and water, alcohol gel is not effective)
- Infection control evaluation is a continuous process and if patients clinical conditions change so should their infection control precautions
- Careful prescribing of antibiotics is essential
 - You must be able to justify every prescription you right
 - There should be clear guidance on the prescription of why the antimicrobial has been prescribed and how long you intend to continue it for
 - This allows someone to come after you and stop the antibiotics as appropriate or evaluate clinical response after the event

Conclusions

- Gastroenteritis is usually caused by organisms acquired by the faecal-oral route
 - *Clostridium difficile*
 - *Salmonella*, *Shigella*, *E. coli* O157, *Campylobacter* sp.
 - *Cryptosporidium*
- Antibiotics are not usually indicated in treatment
- CDAD is a potentially life-threatening infection
- Avoid antibiotics beginning with "C" if possible!

www.microbiologynutsandbolts.co.uk



- Gastroenteritis is caused by organisms transmitted through the faecal oral route
- Antimicrobials are rarely indicated in otherwise fit and healthy individuals
- *Clostridium difficile* Associated Disease is often preventable and can be life-threatening
- There are a number of infection control related measures to prevent the spread of CDAD:
 - Hand hygiene with soap and water
 - Isolation of patients with diarrhoea whatever the cause
 - Careful antimicrobial prescribing
 - Early treatment of patients with infection