

Delirium

What Is Delirium?

Delirium is not dementia. Delirium is a sudden, temporary onset of confusion that causes changes in the way people think and behave. Advanced age increases the risk. Knowing what to look for and treating the causes early can help save lives.

What Causes Delirium?

- Infection
- Medication side-effects
- Not taking medications as prescribed
- Recent surgery with anesthetic
- Worsening of a chronic illness
- Dehydration
- Poor nutrition
- High or low blood sugar
- Constipation or diarrhea
- Pain
- Alcohol use or withdrawal
- Recent injury or fall
- Recent move or hospital stay
- Grief over a recent loss, such as the death of a family member, friend or pet
- Poor-fitting hearing aids or glasses
- Low blood levels of Vitamin B12

What Puts Someone at Risk for Delirium?

People are more likely to develop delirium if they:

- Are 70 years or older;
- Had delirium before;
- Have memory or thinking problems;
- Had a severe illness resulting in a hospital stay;
- Are dehydrated;
- Have problems seeing or hearing; or
- Are taking five or more medications.

What Are the Signs of Delirium?

- Unusual behaviour
- Confusion
- Restlessness
- Periods of inattention and alterations in alertness
- Being upset
- Slurred speech
- Not making any sense
- Seeing or hearing things that are not there
- Mixing up days and nights
- Drifting between sleep and being awake
- Forgetfulness
- Trouble concentrating
- Not knowing where they are
- Trouble staying awake

How Is Delirium Treated?

Treating delirium means treating the underlying cause. It is very important to find the cause of delirium as soon as possible. This usually means doing tests and asking questions. Once the cause is known, the most effective treatment can be given. This may include medication, as well as changing the person's surroundings. For many people, delirium can clear in a few days or weeks. Others may not respond to treatment for many weeks. Some people never fully return to their normal selves. You may see some problems with memory and thinking that do not improve. Each person is different.

What Can Caregivers Do to Help?

1. Learn about delirium:

- Know the signs of delirium listed in this handout.
- Tell the physician or other healthcare team member if you notice any signs of delirium.
- Understand that delirium is not dementia. Dementia is the gradual loss of brain cells over time that result in decline of day-to-day thinking. Dementia cannot be cured.

2. Support healthy rest and sleep:

- Reduce noise and distractions.
- Keep lights low or off when resting.
- Improve comfort with a pillow, blanket, warm drink or back rub.
- Do not use sleeping pills if possible.

3. Support mental stimulation:

- Arrange for familiar people to visit.
- Keep sentences short and simple.
- Gently remind them where they are and what is happening (please do NOT argue with them).
- Talk about current events and what is going on around the person.
- Read out loud or use large print or talking books.
- If in hospital or new surroundings, bring a clock, calendar or picture from home.

4. Support physical activity:

- Help with proper sitting position and encourage walking.
- Talk with the healthcare team about safe exercises and activities.

5. Support healthy eating and drinking:

- Encourage and help with eating.
- Offer fluids often.

6. Support good hearing:

- Encourage them to wear their hearing aids.
- Make sure hearing aids are working.

7. Support good seeing:

- Encourage them to wear their glasses or use a magnifying glass.
- Keep glasses clean.
- Use good lighting.

What Should I Do If I Suspect Delirium?

Inform the healthcare provider immediately.