

On the Lookout for Delirium

A guide for patients, families and friends

What is Delirium?

Delirium is a medical condition that changes the way someone thinks and acts. People with delirium become suddenly confused. They act different than their usual self. A person with delirium may get better or worse during the day.



Delirium is caused by many things, like:

- Infection
- Change in medicines
- Surgery
- Alcohol use
- Being ill

Who is at Risk for Delirium?

People who are over the age of 70 are more at risk to develop delirium. Talk to the health care team about some of these risk factors for your loved one:

- Changes in memory
- Dehydration or poor eating
- Severe illness or surgery
- Taking a lot of medications
- Pain / extreme stress
- Poor vision or hearing
- Poor sleep
- Alcohol or substance abuse



You Can Help Us Detect Delirium

Friends and family know the patient the best! You can help the health care team notice when a patient is developing delirium.

Tell a doctor or nurse if your loved one is ...

- Saying things that do not make sense
- Forgetting where they are
- Climbing out of bed and pulling at medical equipment
- Sleeping during the day and awake at night
- Seeing and hearing imaginary things
- Having trouble concentrating
- Acting confused one minute and okay the next
- Unusually quiet and withdrawn



How is Delirium Treated?

The doctors and nurses will do their best to find out what is causing the delirium.

This might include:

- Blood work
- Urine tests
- Medicine review
- X-rays

Once the health care team knows the cause, they can set up a plan to treat it. Delirium usually goes away once the cause is treated.

Will My Loved One Return to Normal?

With time and treatment delirium may improve. Everyone is different. Some patients improve or recover fully. Others do not. Recovery times are also different for each person. It could be days or months until your loved one gets better.

Helpful Hints for Family

Know that your loved one may not be themselves. They may forget what was said, what they did, or what went on.

Try not to take some of the things your loved one says to heart.

Look after yourself, get rest, and try to relax whenever you can.

Helping your Loved One

Friends and family members can help prevent and manage delirium.
Talk to the health care team to see how you can help.

Here are some suggestions:

- Keep them warm and comfortable.
- Reduce noise and distractions.
- Talk to them in simple sentences using a calm, soft voice. Remind them that they are safe and that all is well.
- Remind them of the date, time, and season.
- Bring some items from home (pictures, book, watch).
- Encourage them to wear their glasses and hearing aids.
- Take them for little walks during the day.
- Encourage and help them with eating and drinking.
- Encourage normal sleeping patterns.
- If you notice they are in pain, tell the nurse.
- Speak to the health care team about if it is appropriate to have a care partner present in order for your loved one to feel more secure, or if there are other things care partners can do to help.

