

# Delirium Information for Families and Caregivers

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## What is delirium?

**Delirium** is a medical condition in which a person experiences sudden confusion caused by their illness or treatments. Delirium can start quickly (within a few hours) or over several days after being admitted to the hospital. If the person already has memory problems, delirium may make those memory problems worse. Delirium usually improves in a few days to a few weeks after treatment starts.

## What are the signs and symptoms of delirium?

Symptoms of delirium can come and go during the day, and they often get worse in the evening and at night. People with delirium may have some of the following symptoms:

- Confusion or forgetfulness
- Trouble concentrating
- Seeing, hearing, or feeling things that are not there
- Sudden changes in emotions (anger, agitation, depression, irritability, overexcitement)
- Changes in their usual sleep habits
  - A switched night-day, sleep-wake cycle
  - Feeling more sleepy than normal during the day
  - Poor sleep during nighttime hours

## How is delirium different from dementia?

Delirium and dementia are both health conditions that change a person's ability to think clearly and care for themselves, but there are some important differences. You can read more about these differences in the table below:

	<b>Delirium</b>	<b>Dementia</b>
<b>How quickly does the condition start?</b>	Delirium starts suddenly, and change happens over short periods of time.	Dementia starts slowly, and it may be years before it's noticed.
<b>How long does it last?</b>	It may last for hours, days, or even weeks.	It slowly becomes worse over time, and it cannot be cured.
<b>Is it treatable?</b>	Yes. Delirium usually goes away in days to weeks if treated properly.	No, but some symptoms may be delayed with medication.

### **Who is at risk of getting delirium?**

A number of factors may increase a person's risk for delirium, including:

- Serious medical illness
- Infections (like urinary tract infections or pneumonia)
- Alcohol or drug use, or withdrawal from alcohol or drug use
- Pain
- Age 65 or older
- Dementia
- Dehydration (not having enough water in your body)
- Poor eyesight or hearing
- Starting new medications, changing current medication doses, or using many different medications
- Having surgery or other medical procedures with anesthesia (medication that makes you sleep during surgery)
- Not getting enough sleep

## **What will the healthcare team do to treat delirium?**

Our goal for treating delirium is to figure out what is causing it and fix the problem. We may do any or all of the following to find the cause and help manage the symptoms of delirium:

- Order tests to check for medical problems that could be causing delirium
- Review medications to see if they are causing delirium or making delirium worse
- Prescribe medications to treat agitation or aggression
- Create a calm and supportive environment to help reduce confusion

## **What can I do to help someone with delirium?**

Since you know your loved one best, you can quickly notice changes in their behavior or signs of confusion. Tell the healthcare staff right away if you notice something isn't right about your loved one. This will help us find the cause and start treatment. Some other actions you can take include:

- **Communicate with the healthcare team.**
  - Let them know if you or your loved one needs an interpreter.
  - Tell the healthcare team what your loved one was like before getting sick.
  - Report any change in your loved one's medications (like if they're taking a new medication, if they stopped taking a medication, or if there was a recent dose change for their medication).
  - Contact a member of the healthcare team if you have any questions about the need for any lines, tubes, or devices connected to your loved one.
  - Let the nurse know if your loved one's pain is not controlled.
  - Let the nurse know if your loved one has a change in their bowel or bladder routine. The most common changes usually involve color, consistency, frequency, and how much control they have over when they go to the bathroom.

- **Set up visits from family and friends.**
  - Friends and family are comfortable and familiar, so they can help the person with delirium feel better.
  - Limit visitors to 1-2 at a time so the person doesn't feel overwhelmed.
  - Keep the person's room calm. Avoid a lot of extra noise (from the TV, too many visitors, or having many different conversations going on in the room).
  - Keep in mind that your loved one still needs to rest and heal. We may ask you to use the visitor lounge if it seems like the person with delirium needs a break.
- **Bring them items from home that are familiar and provide comfort, such as family photos or a favorite blanket.**
- **Help them with their daily activities.**
  - Make sure they are wearing their hearing aids, eyeglasses, and dentures.
  - Help them sit up in a chair or get propped up in bed for meals.
  - Help them to go for a walk (a few times a day, if possible).
  - Encourage them to drink fluids and eat regularly (if they are allowed).
- **Help them get normal sleep.**
  - Limit their daytime naps, so that they'll sleep properly at night.
  - Keep lights on during the day and turn them off at night.
  - Ask our staff for eye masks and earplugs for them to sleep with. These help decrease noises and interruptions during the night.

## **How do I talk to someone with delirium?**

Here are some helpful tips for your conversations:

- Speak softly and slowly, using simple words.
- Face your loved one when you're speaking to them.

- Help your loved one feel connected. Talk about familiar events.
- Try not to argue or correct your loved one if they are not making sense or if they seem paranoid (they seem extremely worried or distrustful). Respond to them in a comforting and reassuring way. For example, you can say, “You sound angry/scared/sad. I’m here to keep you safe.”

## **How do I care for myself while taking care of someone with delirium?**

Caring for yourself is one of the most important things you can do as a caregiver. When your needs are taken care of, you’re able to be a more effective and loving caregiver. There are self-care practices you can use to help make the situation more manageable for yourself. Here are some tips:

- Make your health a priority. Eat well, stay active, and get plenty of rest.
- Make time for yourself each day. Do something you enjoy and find relaxing.
- Be patient. It is normal for your loved one to have good and bad days.
- Share your feelings with someone you trust.
- Ask for help. Be specific on how others can help you, and don’t try to do it all yourself.
- Talk to your provider if you feel stressed or overwhelmed.

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