

Delirium

The purpose of this information sheet is to explain about delirium to patients, their family and/or carers. If you have any questions after reading this leaflet, please speak to a member of the healthcare team.

What is delirium?

Delirium is a state of sudden confusion which tends to occur in people who are unwell or have recently had surgery. It is a common reason for coming to hospital and can also develop during a hospital stay.

Delirium can make a person more unwell, increasing their risk of falling and lengthen the overall time in hospital. While most people who are treated for delirium recover quickly and fully, others might take longer to get better and unfortunately, some people will never get back to exactly how they were before. For these reasons, it's important to recognise the symptoms and identify those at risk of delirium.

Who is at risk of delirium?

Older people are most likely to develop delirium; up to 50% of over 65s in hospital develop delirium. Those who are frail, have many medical conditions, have had delirium before, or have suffered a significant injury (e.g. a broken bone) are also at risk.

People with memory problems or dementia are more likely to develop delirium, however, while some of the symptoms overlap, delirium is not the same as dementia.

What are the symptoms of delirium?

The sudden confusion in delirium can affect a person's alertness, memory and thinking, orientation and attention. Some people experience hallucinations, i.e. seeing or hearing things that are not real. These symptoms can fluctuate throughout the day and over time.

There are three types of delirium:

- 1) **Hyperactive** – A person may feel agitated or restless, have altered personality, disturbed sleep or hallucinations. This can be frightening for the person, as well as for the family and friends.
- 2) **Hypoactive** – A person may feel more drowsy and withdrawn, and appear less responsive to those around them.
- 3) **Mixed** - features of both (1) hyperactive and (2) hypoactive delirium.

What causes delirium?

There are lots of causes of delirium which include, but are not limited to:

- Dehydration
- Pain
- Reduced mobility
- Alcohol/drugs
- Surgery
- Changes in environment
- Heart or lung disease
- Impaired hearing/eyesight
- Altered blood salts/sugars
- Constipation
- Infection
- Poor eating
- Head injury
- Difficulty passing urine
- Disturbed sleep
- Medications
- Strokes or mini strokes

While there are often multiple causes responsible for someone's delirium, 3 in 10 patients with delirium have no identifiable cause.

How do doctors manage delirium?

Doctors will first diagnose delirium by asking standardised questions to check for confusion, and by listening to those caring for the patient, to see if the patient's behaviours have changed suddenly.

The doctors will then look for causes of delirium and treat these. Depending on the symptoms, the doctors might look for infection, take blood and urine tests, and ask for scans. They will also check the patient's current medications as some can make delirium worse. Common things like constipation, dehydration and pain will be treated proactively.

The hospital environment can be very confusing for patients with delirium. Healthcare staff are trained to care for these people and use interventions that help with re-orientation and provide familiarity, such as avoiding bed moves and offering light activity, e.g. moving around, looking through photos.

Patients with delirium can sometimes act aggressively or be very energetic. Our staff are trained to use de-escalation measures, such as attentive listening and engaging in activities to distract and reassure the patient as this is best for their health. If a patient is at risk of hurting themselves or others, sedatives may sometimes be necessary.

How can I care for someone with delirium?

Recognising that the person you care for is acting differently is very important. When you notice sudden or fluctuating changes, alert a medical professional, whether you are in hospital or at home.

Things you can do that help:

- Visit your loved one in hospital, familiar faces help.
- Talk calmly in simple sentences and ask only one thing at a time.
- Bring in and encourage use of their hearing aids, glasses and/or dentures (if applicable).
- You may want to bring in one or two of their personal items to help them feel some familiarity.

- Remind them where they are, the month, the day of the week, the time of day. Write this down somewhere easy to see from the bed.
- Encourage your loved one to eat and drink.
- Encourage moving around if safe to do so, and to do some other activities, such as reading.
- Help reassure your loved one if they recall having behaved oddly.
- If they are experiencing hallucinations, avoid disagreeing with them if they are saying unusual things. Try changing the conversation or distract them. The hallucinations will feel real and may be scary for them.

A person should not drive if they have delirium.

Caring for someone with delirium can sometimes be difficult as people with delirium may fluctuate in their behaviours, say shocking things or act in a way that causes distress. It is important to acknowledge this and discuss any issues with the healthcare team.

Further information

Alzheimer's Society - Delirium Information:

- Website <https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/get-support/daily-living/delirium>

Dementia UK - Delirium Information:

- Website <https://www.dementiauk.org/information-and-support/health-advice/delirium>

East and North Hertfordshire NHS Trust - Dementia Services:

- Website <https://www.enherts-tr.nhs.uk/services/dementia-services/further-information/>

NHS Website for England:

- Website <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/confusion/>

NICE CG103 - Information for Public:

- Website <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg103/informationforpublic>



Scan for [Dementia UK](#)
information on delirium



Scan for information on [local NHS](#)
dementia services

Useful contact details

East and North Hertfordshire NHS Trust:

- Website www.enherts-tr.nhs.uk
- Telephone 01438 314333

Hertswise Community Dementia Service:

- Website <https://hertswise.org.uk/>
- Telephone 0300 123 4044

Leaflet information

Information adapted from:

- East and North Hertfordshire NHS Trust Delirium Policy - CP 233 v003
- Dementia UK - <https://www.dementiauk.org/information-and-support/health-advice/delirium/>
- NICE Clinical Knowledge Summary - Delirium - <https://cks.nice.org.uk/topics/delirium/>

**You can request this information in a different format or another language;
please speak to your doctor or nurse.**

Date of publication: October 2024

Version number: 01

Author: VA Pandya, A Puri

Reference: Delirium

Review Date: October 2027

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