

Understanding Delirium

What is delirium?

Delirium is a sudden or worsening change in a person's mental state. It comes on very fast, in only hours or days. It is common in patients with serious illness. Being in a hospital often triggers delirium.

Delirium can lead to:

- falls, infections, self-harm
- injury of staff and family members
- longer hospital stays
- caregiver strain.

What are the signs of delirium?

Learn about the signs of delirium. If your loved one has any signs of delirium, tell the doctor right away.

Mental signs of delirium are:

- Sudden confusion
- Trouble paying attention
- A hard time understanding what's going on
- Scattered thinking
- Memory problems
- Seeing or hearing things that aren't there.

Behavioral signs of delirium are:

- disorganized or slurred speech
- mood or personality changes
- acting restless, upset, agitated, aggressive
- acting sleepy and quiet
- using inappropriate words
- unusual or unexpected emotions
- changes in sleeping habits
- forgetfulness.

Family members or friends may say:

- "This is not my mom (or dad)."
- "She (or he) is never like this."

Is delirium the same as dementia?

No. Delirium and dementia are different.

- Delirium comes on suddenly and can change from one day to the next. It usually goes away after just days or weeks.
- Dementia is a permanent thinking problem. Dementia happens over months or years.

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What causes delirium?

Environmental and emotional causes are:

- changes in surroundings
- changes in daily routine
- being in the hospital
- grief
- stress.

Physical causes are:

- serious or terminal illness
- low oxygen or chemical changes in the brain
- certain medicines
- drug or alcohol abuse
- not getting enough fluids or food
- low levels of vitamin B12, potassium, or sodium in the body
- high or low blood sugar
- digestive trouble, like constipation or diarrhea
- head injury
- various infections.

How is delirium treated?

Sometimes, delirium can be treated if it is caused by something that can be changed.

If the cause cannot be found or changed, the patient's healthcare team will take steps to manage the delirium and help the patient stay safe and comfortable until the delirium goes away on its own.

If my family member has delirium, is there anything I can do to help?

During the day:

- Help keep the person awake during the day.
 - Limit their naps.
 - Get them up and walking.
- Have friends and family come visit.
- Have the person do some of the routine activities that they would normally do at home, like reading a book or playing a game.

During the night:

- Try giving the person warm milk or bedtime teas instead of sleeping medicines before bed.
- Play soothing music and give the person a back rub. Help them relax so they can rest.
- Help the hospital staff by keeping the room noise down and the lights dim.

All the time:

- Make sure the person has their glasses and hearing aides.
- Make sure a clock is nearby and that the person knows why they are in the hospital. They need to know the time, where they are, and what is happening around them.
- Bring in things from home, like a favorite blanket or family photos.
- Pay attention for regular bowel movements and urination.
- Help the person control their pain.
- Keep a consistent routine while in the hospital that is like the person's routine at home.