

Delirium is different from dementia

DELIRIUM

- Delirium comes on quickly, in hours or days. Signs of delirium can change from one day to the next.
- Delirium can make memory and thinking problems worse.
- Delirium usually clears up after a few days or even a week.

DEMENTIA

- Usually dementia is a permanent condition.
- Dementia is a disturbance of thinking. It comes on over months or even years.
- Patients with dementia are more likely to develop delirium.

Does delirium cause thinking problems after a patient leaves the hospital?

- Research shows that patients who develop delirium might have dementia-like thinking problems that can last for months.
- At this time we cannot predict who might develop dementia-like thinking problems.

How you can help

- Speak softly and use simple words or phrases
- Remind the patient of the day and date.
- Talk about family and friends.
- Bring glasses, hearing aids.
- Decorate the room with calendars, posters, or family pictures. These familiar items might be reminders of home.
- Provide the patient with favorite music or TV shows.
- If your loved one has delirium, we might ask you to sit and help calm them.

ICU Delirium &
Cognitive Impairment
Study Group

www.ICUdelirium.org

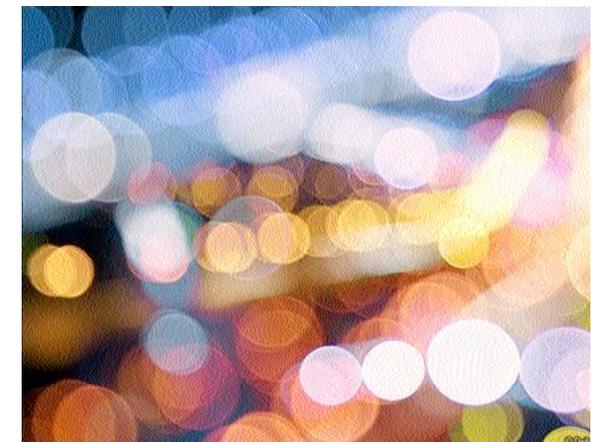
for questions, please email
delirium@vanderbilt.edu

This is for education only. Ask your own doctor any questions you have about your health. © 2010 by Vanderbilt University. All rights reserved. Vanderbilt Medical Center
Patient & Family Centered Care HC-0582 04/10

In the Intensive Care Unit

Delirium

*A guide for families
and patients*



www.ICUdelirium.org

What is delirium?

The word “delirium” is used to describe a severe state of confusion.

People with delirium

- cannot think clearly
- have trouble paying attention
- have a hard time understanding what is going on around them
- may see or hear things that are not there. These things seem very real to them.

Delirium is common

- About 2 out of 3 patients in ICUs get delirium.
- Seven out of 10 patients get delirium while they are on a breathing machine or soon after.



Causes of delirium

Experts think delirium is caused by a change in the way the brain is working. This can be caused by:

- less oxygen to the brain
- the brain’s inability to use oxygen
- chemical changes in the brain
- certain medicines
- infections
- severe pain
- medical illnesses
- alcohol, sedatives, or pain killers
- withdrawal from alcohol, nicotine

People most likely to get delirium

People who

- have dementia
- are advanced in age
- have surgery, especially hip or heart
- have depression
- take certain high-risk medicines
- have poor eyesight or hearing
- have an infection or sepsis
- have heart failure

Signs of delirium

Your family member may

- appear agitated or even quiet
- be confused
- be aggressive
- use inappropriate words
- not be able to pay attention or follow directions
- be unsure about where they are
- be unsure about the time of day
- see things that are not there
- act different from usual
- have changes in sleeping habits
- have emotional changes
- have movements that are not normal, like tremors or picking at clothes
- have memory problems

