How to Help a Patient with Delirium?

- 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.

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.

For questions, please email or visit our website.

- ICUDelirium.org
- CIBS@vumc.org

This is for education only. Ask your own doctor any questions you have about your health.
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.

7 out of 10 patients get delirium while they are on a breathing machine or soon after.

Delirium is associated with thinking and memory problems that can last for months.

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

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

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