



DELIRIUM: A GUIDE FOR PATIENTS & FAMILIES

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 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.

PEOPLE MOST LIKELY TO GET DELIRIUM:

People who

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

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

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

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.
 - between 14-56% of elderly hospitalized patients have delirium
 - 10-22% of elderly patients at the time of admission,
 - an additional 10-30% develop delirium after admission
- delirium following general surgery is 5-10% and as high as 42% following orthopedic surgery

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.

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.