

Information about Delirium

Adapted with permission from:

<https://americandeliriumsociety.org/family-guidance>



What is Delirium?

Delirium is a state of confusion that comes on very suddenly and lasts hours to days. If your loved one becomes delirious, it means she or he cannot think clearly, cannot pay attention and is not aware of their environment. Sometimes people refer to delirium as a “change in mental status,” “sundowning” or “ICU psychosis.” More than 7 million hospitalized Americans suffer from delirium each year.

What causes Delirium?

Many things can cause delirium, including medications, infections, and lack of sleep. Often, a combination of problems causes delirium. Delirium can be made worse by use of physical restraints, lack of physical activity, bladder catheters, and certain medications. The medical team should look for delirium causes and treat them, and be careful not to do things that might make it worse.

Delirium vs. Dementia.

A person can have both delirium and dementia at the same time, but they are not the same. Dementia comes on gradually and is a permanent condition. Delirium can develop suddenly and usually goes away in days to weeks if treated properly. People who have dementia are at higher risk of developing delirium.

Inform the health care team.

Tell the medical team how your loved one usually thinks and behaves. The medical team usually refers to this as the patient’s “baseline.”

Your loved one may not recognize you.

Do not take it personally if your loved one does not recognize you. This is common when people have delirium. Remind your loved one who you are when you first see them. For example, “Hi Mom! It’s your daughter, Liz. I am here to check on you and keep you company for a while.” Your loved one may say and do things that are out of character. This is due to the delirium and that will change when the delirium improves.

Keep instructions simple.

When helping your loved one with basic needs (getting to the bathroom, eating, dressing), keep instructions simple. If your loved one cannot do what needs to be done, do not argue or try to reason. Simply try again later.

Bring in important objects from your loved one’s home.

Glasses, hearing aids, and dentures can be helpful for communication and comfort. Family photos, music, or other familiar objects may also help.



Additional resources

<https://americandeliriumsociety.org/what-delirium>

<https://americandeliriumsociety.org/family-guidance>

QR code to 4M Modules



Use TV or radio for relaxation.

TV or radio can help your loved one relax and help them stay engaged with the outside world. In some cases, TV and radio may be too much information for the brain to process so may cause anxiety and agitation.

Do not directly dispute delusions.

Hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that are not there) and delusions (believing things that are obviously not true) are symptoms of delirium. Do not directly dispute hallucinations and delusions expressed by your loved ones. Instead, provide reassurance that they are safe.

Change the subject or environment.

If your loved one is stuck on a topic or issue that is causing them anxiety or agitation, changing the subject or the environment may be helpful.

Educate friends and visitors.

Educate family and friends who are visiting about delirium, so they know what to expect. Remind them that one of the most important things to do for someone with delirium is to help them feel secure and safe. While having friends and family close by can help ease agitation, having too many people visit is likely overwhelming.

Communicate clearly and concisely with your loved one.

Speak slowly and clearly with your loved one and avoid complicated topics. People with delirium may be less talkative than normal or say things that do not make sense. It can be helpful to talk with your loved one even if they cannot talk back, to help them feel supported and oriented. Always speak in a calm tone, using clear but respectful language. To the right are some conversation topics that might be helpful.

Music: Ask about their favorite music and tell them about yours. If possible, listen to the music together.

Weather: What is the weather like right now? Talk about what you see out the window.

Food: Ask about what they want to eat for their next meal or their favorite food. Tell them about your favorite food or what you are having for dinner.

Time, date, and place: Talk about the date today, what time it is, and where your loved one is now. Reassure them that they are safe and will be well cared for while they recover.

Nice things that happened today: Ask about something nice that happened today and tell them about what happened in your day that was pleasant.

Narrate what you are doing: Describe what you are doing even if it seems obvious. Tell the person with delirium that you are reading a book and that you are sitting in chair next to them. This will help reassure and orient them to what is going on around them.