



# Delirium Guide for Patients and Families

## What is Delirium?

- ✓ It is a sudden confusion that can happen when someone is sick.
- ✓ It causes big changes in how they think, act, and move.
- ✓ It can sometimes be prevented. If it does happen, it needs attention and treatment right away.

## What does delirium look and feel like?

Sudden behaviors to look for may include:

- ✓ Trouble thinking clearly
- ✓ Trouble paying attention
- ✓ Trouble remembering
- ✓ Being unsure about what is happening
- ✓ Trouble understanding what they are being asked to do
- ✓ Trouble talking such as:
  - Speaking fast or slow
  - Mumbling
  - Not making sense
  - Reverting to speaking their first language
- ✓ Feeling afraid that people are trying to harm them (paranoid)
- ✓ Seeing, feeling, or hearing something that is not there (hallucinations)
- ✓ Feeling nervous
- ✓ Being restless or sleepy

- These behaviors may come and go and may get worse in the evening or night.
- Alert your healthcare team if you experience any symptoms of delirium.
- Doctors can investigate this change and take action.

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## What causes delirium?

One or more of the following can cause delirium:

- ✓ Illness such as urinary tract infection, pneumonia
- ✓ Lack of sleep
- ✓ Dehydration
- ✓ Fever
- ✓ Pain
- ✓ Surgery or anesthesia
- ✓ Trouble urinating or having a bowel movement
- ✓ Trouble breathing
- ✓ Electrolytes being too low or high (example: potassium, calcium, sodium)
- ✓ Medication (prescribed or over-the-counter)
- ✓ Quickly stopping alcohol/drug or medicine (alcohol, opioids, sleeping medication, nicotine, recreational drugs)
- ✓ Terminal illness

**Delirium is a warning sign that the brain is not working because a person is not well.**

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## Who is at risk for delirium?

People who:

- ✓ Are 65+ years of age, or are very young (under 5 years of age)
- ✓ Have poor eyesight or hearing loss
- ✓ Are very sick with multiple illnesses
- ✓ Are taking many medications
- ✓ Have a history of delirium
- ✓ Have dementia or other brain disease (e.g. stroke, head injury, depression)

## How do delirium and dementia differ?

Dementia	Delirium
Slow and steady decline in thinking	Sudden decline in thinking
Changes occur over months to years	Changes over hours to days
Progressive and long-lasting	Usually resolves

Having delirium can increase the risk of memory problems in the future and may make dementia worse.

## The goals of the healthcare team are to:

1. Prevent delirium when possible
2. Detect delirium early
3. Identify and treat the cause(s) of delirium according to the person's goals of care
  - This may involve physical and mental status examinations, laboratory tests, and imaging (x-rays; CT scans)
4. Provide a supportive, safe and comfortable space

## What can you do to help your loved one?

You know your loved one best. Please tell the staff about your loved one's normal ability to function and think when not sick or hospitalized.

***Knowing someone's normal function can help the healthcare team better identify when there is a change and possibly identify delirium.***

## List of helpful tips to prevent delirium

- ✔ Visit as often as you can. During visits:
  - Remind them of the time, day, and where they are. You could bring in an easy-to-see clock or calendar to help.
  - Bring in familiar items (photos, blanket, etc.).

- Assist your loved one with eyeglasses (clean), hearing aids (batteries) and dentures as needed.
  - Promote any typical routines and speak of familiar topics.
  - Encourage your loved one to be up in a chair for meals.
  - Provide a change of scenery during the daytime if possible (go outside the room or bring outdoors).
  - Support a healthy sleep routine:
    - Keep shades up during the day and lights dim at night.
    - Discourage daytime napping.
    - May ask staff for eye masks and ear plugs at night if needed.
  - ☑ Discuss with the healthcare team:
    - Your loved one's preferences for meals, sleep, and activity.
    - The current list of medicines that your loved one has been taking (prescription and over-the-counter).
    - How you can participate in your loved one's care (assist with eating/drinking, exercises and walking, hygiene care).
    - **If you see any changes in their thinking or behavior or if something does not seem quite right, let the healthcare team know.** Families are often the first to notice any changes in thinking or behavior.
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### If someone has delirium, the following will be helpful:

Continue the above **List of helpful tips to prevent delirium** along with the following.

- ☑ Speak in a calm voice facing the person.
- ☑ Use simple and short sentences and allow time for the person to answer.
- ☑ If they are scared or talking about things that do not make sense:
  - Remind them of current circumstances.
  - Avoid correcting them.
  - Use distraction and talk about something else.
  - Listen to their fears and reassure them they are safe.
- ☑ If restless, consider placing familiar or interesting items in their hands (squishy balls, rolled-up washcloths, small stuffed animals).
- ☑ Encourage and assist with eating and drinking if allowed.

- ✔ Keep room calm.
    - Play preferred music.
    - TV may be on if it is calming.
  - ✔ Keep comfortable.
    - Warm blanket or cooling fan.
    - Tell the healthcare team if in pain or uncomfortable.
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### What to consider for your own health and well-being as a family or friend:

- ✔ Share visiting with other family members or friends.
  - ✔ Take breaks and eat regularly.
  - ✔ Try not to take any negative comments from your loved one personally.
  - ✔ Consider recording a loving message for the person.
  - ✔ Let the healthcare team know if you have questions or need more support for yourself.
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### What to do when a person with delirium returns home:

After having delirium, the person may or may not be back to normal.

The following tips to support recovery may include:

- ✔ Healthy eating and drinking.
- ✔ Movement (walking, chair exercise, dancing).
- ✔ Keeping the brain active (reading, word search, games).
- ✔ Using tools as needed (planners, lists, routines).
- ✔ Being social.
- ✔ Healthy sleep routine.
- ✔ Only take over-the-counter medications and prescriptions as directed by your healthcare provider.
- ✔ Ask your healthcare provider before beginning herbs or supplements.
- ✔ Do not use alcohol or illegal drugs.
- ✔ Keep all follow-up appointments.

## Contact your healthcare provider if:

- ✔ Symptoms do not improve or become worse.
  - ✔ New symptoms of delirium develop (see [What does delirium look and feel like?](#)).
  - ✔ Caring for your loved one at home does not seem safe (such as aggression or violence).
  - ✔ Eating, drinking or communication stops.
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## Key Points

- ✔ The earlier that delirium is detected and treated, recovery improves.
- ✔ Family or friends are important in the early detection of delirium.
- ✔ Delirium can be scary for the person and family. Share feelings and seek help from your healthcare team.
- ✔ **Delirium is a warning sign that the person needs help right away.**
- ✔ If you see any changes in their thinking or behavior or if something does not seem quite right, let the healthcare team know.



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