

Delirium

Information for patients, relatives and carers

- ① For more information about delirium, please speak to a member of the nursing or medical staff on the ward

Contents	Page
What is delirium?	3
Symptoms of delirium	4
How common is delirium?	5
Why does it happen?	6
How is delirium treated?	7
Delirium is different from Dementia.....	7
Can sedative medication help?.....	8
How can I help someone with Delirium?	9
How long does it take to get better?	10
What can I expect after delirium?	10
Tell us what you think of this leaflet	11
Teaching, training and research.....	11
Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS).....	11
Leaflets in alternative languages or formats	12

What is delirium?

Delirium is a state of mental confusion that can happen when someone becomes medically unwell. Delirium is sometimes also called 'acute confusional state'. It usually starts suddenly, fluctuates and can affect a person's behaviour, mood and memory.

Symptoms of delirium

A person with delirium may:

- Be very agitated or restless and unable to sit still
- Or be very slow and sleepy
- Disorientated - be unsure of who people are or where they are
- Have difficulty paying attention - be less aware of what is going on around them
- Be unable to have a conversation or speak clearly
- Have hallucinations - see or hear things that are not there or have vivid dreams, which may carry on when they wake up
- Worry that other people are trying to harm them
- Sleep more during the day but wake up at night
- Restless at night

Delirium can fluctuate and involve sudden changes in a person's mental state. For example from being very tired and drowsy, to being agitated, then back to being drowsy again. People with delirium may also be more confused at certain times of the day than at others, often worsening in the evening or at night.

How common is delirium?

Around two in ten patients in hospital will have a period of delirium. Delirium is more common in certain people such as those who:

- Are older
- Have memory problems or dementia
- Have poor eyesight or hearing
- Have recently had surgery
- Have a terminal illness or have an illness of the brain such as an infection, a stroke or head injury
- Have had delirium before

Why does it happen?

The most common causes of delirium are:

- An infection (e.g. a chest or urine infection)
- Fever
- Side effects of medication (e.g. pain relief or steroids)
- Chemical imbalances in the body, like dehydration or low salt levels
- Liver or kidney problems
- Suddenly stopping drugs or alcohol
- Major surgery
- Epilepsy
- Brain injury or infection
- Constipation
- Being in an unfamiliar place

There may be more than one cause of the delirium. Sometimes it is not possible to identify the cause.

How is delirium treated?

If somebody suddenly becomes confused, they need to see a doctor urgently. It is important to identify the cause of the delirium where possible and treat it. For example if the cause of the delirium is a urinary tract infection then antibiotics can be prescribed.

Delirium is different from Dementia

People with dementia are at higher risk of having a delirium; however dementia usually comes on gradually over months or years, whereas delirium starts very quickly within hours or days. Dementia is a progressive condition, whereas a person can recover from delirium with the confusion improving once the cause is treated.

In some people with delirium the confusion does not always improve and may worsen despite the cause being treated.

Can sedative medication help?

Sedative medication can make delirium worse, so it is only used in exceptional circumstances:

- To help someone relax so they are able to have investigations or treatment
- When someone is very agitated or anxious
- When someone is having hallucinations - hearing or seeing things that are not there and they are distressed
- When someone who drinks a lot of alcohol stops drinking suddenly

Sedative medication should be given in the lowest possible dose for the shortest possible time and monitored closely. When someone who usually drinks a lot of alcohol stops suddenly, they will need a regular dose of a sedative medication reducing over several days. This will stop withdrawal symptoms but should be done under close medical supervision.

How can I help someone with Delirium?

- Stay calm, speak softly and talk to them in short simple sentences
- Check they understand. You may have to repeat things
- Remind them of what is happening and how they are doing
- Remind them of the time and date and make sure they can see a clock or calendar
- If they are in hospital, bring in familiar objects from home
- Make sure they have their glasses or hearing aid if needed
- Help them to eat and drink
- A calm and quiet environment will help
- Promote a regular sleep pattern
- Have a light on near by at night so that they can see where they are when they wake up
- Ensure the patient has an “About Me” form completed which will assist the staff to provide person centred care

How long does it take to get better?

Delirium can get better. Sometimes it can take several days, weeks or months for the symptoms to resolve fully. Some people with delirium do not recover and the confusion may progress.

It is important to discuss recovery and any concerns with the medical or ward team.

What can I expect after delirium?

- Once somebody has recovered from delirium, they may not remember what has happened. People may recall an unpleasant and frightening memory of what happened. It may help for somebody to talk about the experience with them.
- If somebody has already had delirium in the past, they are more likely to have delirium again if they become medically unwell in the future.
- Look out for the warning signs of delirium such as a sudden onset of confusion.
- If you recognise the signs of delirium please tell a member of nursing or medical staff or GP if the person is at home. The sooner the delirium is treated the better the chance of full recovery.

Tell us what you think of this leaflet

We hope that you found this leaflet helpful. If you would like to tell us what you think, please contact:

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Teaching, training and research

Our Trust is committed to teaching, training and research to support the development of health and healthcare in our community. Healthcare students may observe consultations for this purpose. You can opt out if you do not want students to observe. We may also ask you if you would like to be involved in our research.

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS offers impartial advice and assistance to patients, their relatives, friends and carers. We can listen to feedback (positive or negative), answer questions and help resolve any concerns about Trust services.

PALS can be contacted on 01904 726262, or email pals@york.nhs.uk.

An answer phone is available out of hours.

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Owner	Liz Sweeting, Specialist Mental Health Nurse
Date first issued	August 2008
Review Date	April 2022
Version	3 (issued May 2020)
Approved by	Delirium Steering Group, Elderly Medicine
Document Reference	PIL 499 v3
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