

DELIRIUM

What is delirium?

Delirium is a sudden, temporary onset of confusion that causes changes in the way people think and behave. Older people are most at risk. Knowing what to look for and treating the causes early can help save lives.

What causes delirium?

- Infection
- Medication side-effects
- Not taking medications as prescribed
- Recent surgery with anaesthetic
- Worsening of a chronic illness
- Dehydration
- Poor nutrition
- High or low blood sugar
- Constipation or diarrhea
- Pain
- Alcohol use or withdrawal
- Recent injury or fall
- Recent move or hospital stay
- Grief over a recent loss, for example death of a family member, friend, or pet
- Poor fitting hearing aids or glasses
- Low blood levels of Vitamin B12

What puts someone at risk for getting delirium?

People are more likely to get delirium if they have:

- Had delirium before
- Memory or thinking problems
- Severe illness resulting in hospital stays
- Dehydration
- Problems with seeing or hearing
- Are taking 5 or more medications

What are the signs of delirium?

- Confusion
- Restlessness
- Being upset
- Slurred speech
- Not making any sense
- Seeing or hearing things that are not there
- Mixing up days and nights
- Drifting between sleep and being awake
- Forgetting things
- Trouble concentrating
- More alert than normal
- Not knowing where they are
- Trouble staying awake

How is delirium diagnosed?

Delirium is diagnosed by:

- Noticing signs of delirium
- Learning the person's medical history
- Learning the person's usual thinking ability, daily routines, communication style, moods, behaviours and sleep habits.
- Doing a physical examination. Doing blood, urine, and X-ray tests to find the cause.

How is delirium treated?

Treating delirium means treating the underlying cause. It is very important to figure out the cause of delirium as soon as possible. This usually means doing tests and asking questions. Once the cause is known, the most effective treatment can be given. This may include medication as well as changing the person's surroundings.

For many people, delirium can clear in a few days or weeks. Others may not respond to treatment for many weeks. Some people never fully return to their normal selves. You may see some problems with memory and thinking that do not go away. Each person is different.

What can you do to help?

Learn about delirium	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Know the signs of delirium listed in this handout.• Tell the doctor or health care team member if you notice any signs of delirium.• Understand that delirium is not dementia.• Dementia is the gradual loss of brain cells over time that results in decline of day-to-day thinking. Dementia cannot be cured.
Support healthy rest and sleep	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reduce noise and distractions.• Keep light low or off when resting.• Improve comfort with a pillow, blanket, warm drink or back rub.• Not use sleeping pills if possible.
Support physical activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Help with sitting and walking.• Talk with the health care team about safe exercise and activities.
Support healthy eating and drinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Encourage and help with eating.• Offer fluids often.
Support good hearing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Encourage the wearing of hearing aides.• Make sure hearing aides are working.
Support good seeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Encourage the wearing of glasses or use a magnifying glass.• Keep glasses clean.• Use good lighting.
Support mental stimulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Arrange for familiar people to visit.• Keep sentences short and simple.• Gently remind them where they are and what is happening. Don't argue with them.• Talk about current events and what is going on around the person.• Read out loud or using large print or talking books.• Bring in a clock, calendar or pictures from home.

Where can I learn more?

Island Health Website: www.islandhealth.ca/learn-about-health/seniors/delirium

The information in this handout is intended only for the person it was given to by the health care team. It does not replace the advice or directions given to you by your doctor.