

Managing Delirium

What is delirium?

Delirium is when a person becomes suddenly very confused. It happens quickly, usually in hours or days, and the symptoms can change within a day. Delirium can be caused by many things, such as not drinking enough water, medicine, infections, or drug use.

Delirium can happen to anyone, but it is more common in older people. Most of the time, it can go away if doctors find out what is causing it and treat it. In the last days of life, delirium can happen as the body responds to changes from illness.

Delirium is different from dementia. Dementia happens slowly and is not reversible. However, people with dementia can also have delirium.

Signs and symptoms of delirium

- Changes in how alert or tired a person feels
- Not recognizing family or surroundings
- Trouble focusing
- Getting confused about where they are or what time it is
- Seeing or hearing things that aren't real
- Changes in feelings, like becoming angry, scared, or yelling
- Changing topics quickly during conversations
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Not showing emotions

PATIENT AND FAMILY EDUCATION

- Speaking differently or using unusual words
- Restlessness

What can you do to help with delirium?

- Create a calm space with familiar music and objects.
- Remove anything that might cause tripping and make sure the room is well lit.
- Help the person remember where they are, what time it is, and who they are when needed.
- If the person wears glasses or hearing aids, make sure they are nearby and ready to use.
- Encourage eating and drinking during the day to help them sleep better at night.
- Offer spiritual support if it's something the person wants.
- Reassure family and visitors that the changes in behavior are due to a medical condition.

What should you tell your care team?

- Report any of the signs or symptoms mentioned above.

People with delirium may show one or more of these signs at any time. New symptoms should be reported to the care team so they can discuss the best way to manage them.

Other helpful resources

Anxiety Stoplight Tool

Hospice Training for Caregivers and Families Video: Anxiety

Using Haloperidol (Haldol) to Treat Symptoms

