

# Delirium

Helping patients and families  
deal with acute confusion



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We welcome your comments on this leaflet and the services we provide. You'll find comment boxes at reception, on the wards, in the Iona Café and in Day Therapies. You can also comment via our website.

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## What is delirium?

**Delirium is a sudden change in how people think and behave. It's a sign that someone is physically unwell.**

Sometimes people who are delirious see things that other people can't see, or believe things that are not true. Delirium is a common problem for people living with an advanced illness and can be very distressing for patients and their families.

Delirium develops quickly over a few hours or days. It may come and go at different times of day or night, and people may seem themselves at times but be confused at other times. You may notice that the person seems muddled, withdrawn, unexpectedly sleepy or agitated. For some people, delirium will only last for a couple of hours but for others, it might last several days or even weeks.

Delirium usually improves if we're able to identify and treat the cause but that's not always possible.

Sometimes, delirium is known as 'acute confusion' but the healthcare team will refer to it as a delirium, or they may talk about agitation. If delirium happens as part of the process of dying then it is often called 'terminal agitation'.

### WHAT CAUSES DELIRIUM?

There are lots of reasons why people develop delirium. A person may have one or more of the risk factors listed below:

- + An infection, for example a chest or urine infection
- + Constipation
- + Urine retention
- + Dehydration
- + Disease in the brain
- + Being in an unfamiliar environment
- + Organ failure
- + Stopping medicines or starting new medicines, for example pain-killers or sleeping tablets

### THE SIGNS OF DELIRIUM

People with delirium may:

- + Experience anxiety, depression, irritability or euphoria
- + Be quiet and withdrawn, or very restless and disturbed
- + Be confused about where they are or think they're somewhere different
- + Have difficulty following a conversation or talk in an incoherent manner

- + Feel worried, frightened or even paranoid
- + Experience hallucinations or vivid dreams which carry on when they wake up
- + Be more confused at certain times of the day, particularly in the evenings or night-time
- + Wander without being able to express where they're going
- + Occasionally become incontinent.

### HOW WE CARE FOR SOMEONE WITH DELIRIUM

There are several options available to our medical professionals for treating delirium. We can use:

- + Medicine to help the patient feel calmer and less stressed
- + Fluids to support hydration and, potentially, flush out a build-up of medicine that may be causing delirium. We will try to get the person to drink fluids or we may use a drip
- + Antibiotics, in syrup or tablet form, if the person has an infection.

If a person is experiencing delirium at the end of their life, we may use medication to make sure they remain calm and are not distressed.

### HOW YOU CAN HELP

You can help someone who is suffering with delirium by:

- + Staying calm and talk in short, easy to understand sentences
- + Avoiding too many visitors or loud noises
- + Checking the person's understanding and repeating things as necessary
- + Gently reminding someone where they are, and what has been happening to them
- + Sharing familiar photos or their favourite items from home
- + Making sure they have their glasses or hearing aids
- + Supporting the person to continue to eat and drink, if they can.

**IF YOU ARE WORRIED THAT SOMEONE MAY BE SUFFERING FROM DELIRIUM, PLEASE SPEAK TO A MEMBER OF STAFF.**