

Delirium awareness

A patient's guide

What is delirium?

Delirium is a common state of confusion which may occur as a complication of a medical illness or after undergoing major surgery.

It usually develops quickly within hours or days. It is a temporary condition which will improve once the cause or causes are identified and treated. Occasionally it may continue for longer.

Delirium can affect up to a third of older patients in hospital, but it can happen at any age. It is more common in those who have major surgery and/or are treated in an intensive care unit.

Delirium is not the same as dementia although people with dementia are more likely to develop delirium when they are ill. Delirium is not a mental illness although the symptoms appear to be similar.

Who is at risk of developing delirium?

People who:

- Have had a major operation.
- Have any acute illness.
- Takes lots of medication.
- Are aged 65 years or older.
- Have memory impairment or dementia.
- Have previously experienced delirium.
- Have conditions such as Parkinson's disease or previous stroke.
- Are very unwell.
- Have impaired sight and/or hearing.

What causes delirium?

There may be multiple factors causing delirium:

- After major operation.
- Starting or stopping certain medications.
- Poor pain management.
- Electrolyte imbalances of salt and calcium in the body.
- Poor control of blood sugar.
- Infections such as urinary tract, respiratory or wound.

- Excess alcohol intake or alcohol withdrawal.
- Recreational drug abuse.
- Dehydration and/or urinary retention or constipation.
- Change of environment.

captured by a gang of drug dealers, not nurses”

- “My mind seemed to have gone; I was in a different world”

What are the symptoms of delirium?

People may present with:

- Increasing confusion.
- Worsened concentration or slow to respond.
- Visual or auditory hallucinations.
- Changes in behaviour such as being restless or agitated.
- Being more withdrawn.
- Reduced appetite.
- Change in sleeping pattern.
- Loss of control of bowel and bladder function.

What do people with delirium report?

- “I had vivid dreams. They were still there when I woke up”
- “I could not recognise my wife, but I could recognise her voice”
- “I thought I was

How can delirium be treated?

It will be treated by:

- Treating the underlying cause or combination of causes.
- Effective communication and reorientation (such as date, time and place).
- Reviewing tablets.
- Offering regular reassurance to patient.
- Involve family and friends in the care of the patient.
- Offering 1:1 care, for safety of patient and others.
- Sedatives if a person is very agitated or distressed, becoming a risk to themselves or to others.

What can you do to support your loved one?

- In the hospital, please report to the nurse or doctor about the symptoms you have noticed.
- It can be very frightening and confusing. Stay calm and clear and try not to overwhelm them.
- Reorientate them in a calm manner.
- Bring in any familiar and favourite objects that they find comforting.
- Assist and encourage with eating and drinking if safe to do so.
- Encourage to mobilise if safe to do so.
- Help them to wear hearing aids and glasses, if they use them.
- They may be at higher risk of falls at home, may need some changes at home to make their environment safe.
- Once discharged from hospital please be in contact with GP so further support can be offered if needed.

- Ask your pharmacist to review medications if you have any concerns.

Delirium is a serious event that should get better as patients recover. However, it can be very common in patients who have intensive care treatment.

It affects up to 80 per cent of patients, but a lack of understanding, fear of judgement or even shame can stop patients seeking help.

Therefore, prevention, recognition and education are vital and so is speaking up. If you are struggling with your own experiences please seek help.

Useful sources of information:

Raising awareness of ICU delirium:

royalpapworth.nhs.uk/our-
hospital/latest-news/intensive-
care-delirium

Becoming confused after an operation:

rcoa.ac.uk/sites/default/files/
documents/2022-06/07-
Confused2019web.pdf

Alzheimer's society:

Phone: 0333 150 3456

Website: alzheimers.org.uk

Carers UK:

Phone: 0808 808 7777

Website: carersuk.org

Age UK:

Phone: 0800 678 1602

Website: ageuk.org.uk

ICU steps:

Website: icusteps.org

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