

- remind them of what is happening & how they are doing
- remind them of the date and time, there is a clock in every bay
- try to make sure that someone they know well is with them. This is often more important during the evening, when confusion can get worse.
- bring in familiar objects from home
- make sure they have their glasses and hearing aid
- help them to eat and drink
- have a light on at night so that they can see where they are if they wake
- keep a diary

How long does it take to get better?

Once the cause is treated a person can recover very quickly from delirium, although sometimes it takes several days or weeks. It can be helpful to sit down with someone who can explain what happened. People with dementia can take a long time to get over delirium. **Most people feel relieved when they understand what has happened and why.**

If a person becomes medically unwell and is treated early, delirium can be prevented. It is important that someone looks out for the warning signs that the person is unwell again to ensure that the medical problem is treated quickly.

Contact Information

If you need further information or advice please contact our Mental Health Liaison Team between 08:00 and 17:30 Monday to Friday:

Bleeps: 2127, 4900 and 4887

With kind acknowledgement
to the Royal College of
Psychiatrists

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M113

Mental Health Liaison Team

Delirium in an Acute Hospital

An information booklet about Delirium, also known as acute confusional state.

Patient & Public Information



This booklet may be helpful if:

you have experienced delirium
you know or are looking after someone
with delirium either at home or on a
ward

**It can be frightening – not only for the
person who is unwell, but also for those
around him or her.**

What is delirium?

Delirium is a state of mental confusion
that can happen if you become medically
unwell. It is also known as an “acute
confusional state”. Medical problems,
surgery and medications can all cause
delirium. It often starts suddenly, but
usually lifts when the condition causing
it gets better.

**About 1 in 10 hospital patients have a
period of delirium.**

What is it like for a person to have delirium?

A person with delirium may:

- be less aware of what is going on
around them
- be unsure about where they are or
what they are doing
- be unable to follow a conversation or
to speak clearly
- have vivid dreams, which are often
frightening and may carry on when they
wake up
- hear noises or voices when there is
nothing or no one to cause them.

- see people or things which aren't there
- worry that other people are trying to
harm you
- be very agitated or restless, unable to
sit still and wandering about
- be very slow or sleepy
- sleep during the day but wake up at
night
- have moods that change quickly; they
can be frightened, anxious, depressed or
irritable
- be more confused at some times than
at others – often in the evening or at
night.

Delirium is more common in people who:

- are older, have memory problems, poor
hearing or eyesight
- have recently had surgery
- have a terminal illness
- have an illness of the brain, such as an
infection, stroke or head injury.

There is often more than one cause, but
the most common causes of delirium are:

- a urine or chest infection
- having a high body temperature
- side-effects of drugs like pain killers
and steroids
- chemical problems in the body, such as
dehydration or low salt levels
- liver or kidney problems, or
constipation

- suddenly stopping drugs or alcohol
- major surgery
- epilepsy
- brain injury or infection
- terminal illness
- being in an unfamiliar place.

How is delirium treated?

If someone suddenly becomes confused,
they need to see a doctor urgently. The
person with delirium may be too
confused to describe what has happened
to them, so it's important that the doctor
can talk to someone who knows the
patient well.

To treat delirium, you need to treat the
cause. For example, an infection may be
treated with antibiotics. In rare situations
sedative medication may be used, but
this is not a usual approach as it can
make delirium worse and require strict
supervision.

How can I help someone with delirium?

A person with delirium may feel calmer
and more in control if you:

- stay calm
- talk to them in short, simple sentences
and reassure them
- check that they have understood you -
repeating things if necessary
- try not to agree with any unusual or
incorrect ideas, but tactfully disagree or
change the subject.