
GUIDE

**Delirium
or
“Acute Confusion”
A guide for caregivers**



The Ottawa | L'Hôpital
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Disclaimer

This is general information developed by The Ottawa Hospital. It is not intended to replace the advice of a qualified healthcare provider. Please consult your own personal physician who will be able to determine the appropriateness of the information for your specific situation.

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What is Delirium?

It is a medical condition that causes a sudden difficulty in thinking clearly, concentrating or remembering things, especially recent things.

“My relative wasn’t like this before!!”

What are the symptoms?

Examples:

- Can’t remember, more forgetful,
- Saying things all mixed up,
- Not knowing where they are
- Restless, climbing out of bed, picking at bedclothes,
- Hearing or seeing things which aren’t real,
- Drifting between sleep and awake,
- Mixing up days and night.

Who can get it? Anyone!

It happens more often in older adults especially after an operation (eg., fractured hip), when severely ill, or with infections.

Is this Dementia?

Some people do have both dementia and delirium. They are 2 different illnesses. People who have dementia seem to get delirium more easily when they are unwell.

What causes a delirium?

Usually there are several reasons: a physical illness, an infection, too many medications or new medications, not drinking enough water, problems with your vision, hearing, previous memory problems.

How is delirium treated?

Everyone can LOOK and SCREEN for the reasons why a delirium might happen. Is it the medications? Is it an infection, eg. bladder infection? Is the person constipated? Do they have pain?

The doctor and nurses will:

- Look for reasons why
- Treat the reasons

Will it go away?

The symptoms usually go away in a few days to a few weeks. Older people sometimes take longer though. Some memory problems may not go away. If so, please advise your doctor (or medical team).

How can you help?

1. Tell your nurse or doctor what your relative was like before. Is this different?
2. Visit regularly and reassure them.
3. Make sure they have their glasses, hearing aids.
4. Help them to sleep. Reduce noise.
5. Offer water and food if allowed.
6. Read to them. Hold hands.
7. Remind them where they are.
8. Bring in familiar things from home – eg. pictures.

