

What delirium is

Delirium is a state of mental confusion that can happen if you become unwell. It is also known as an 'acute confusional state'.

Illness, surgery and medications can all cause delirium. It often starts suddenly, but usually improves when the condition causing it gets better. It can be frightening—not only for the person who is unwell, but also for those around them.

What it's like to have delirium

Delirium can affect 20-30% of people on medical wards and 10-15% of people having surgery.

You may:

- be less aware of what is going on around you
- be unsure about where you are or what you are doing there
- be unable to follow a conversation or speak clearly
- have vivid dreams, which are often frightening and may carry on when you wake up

What it's like to have delirium (continued)

- 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 wander about
- be very slow or sleepy
- sleep during the day but wake up at night
- have moods that change quickly
- be frightened, anxious, depressed or irritable
- be more confused at some times than at others—often in the evening or at night

Who's at risk

People at risk of developing delirium are:

- older people, the risk increases with age
- older people taking multiple medicines
- people with dementia
- people who are dehydrated (loss of water in the body)
- people with an infection
- severely ill people
- people who have had surgery, especially hip surgery
- people who are nearing the end of life
- people with sight or hearing difficulties
- people who have a raised temperature
- older people with constipation or urinary retention

How you can help someone with delirium

You can help someone with delirium feel calmer and more in control if you:

- stay calm
- talk to them in short, simple sentences
- check that they have understood you and repeat things if necessary
- try not to agree with any unusual or incorrect ideas, but tactfully disagree or change the subject
- reassure them. Remind them of what is happening and how they are doing
- remind them of the time and date
- make sure they can see a clock or a calendar
- try to ensure that someone they know well is with them. This is often most important during the evening when delirium often gets worse. If they are in hospital, bring in some 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 up at night

Delirium is distressing for everyone. Once the underlying cause has been treated, the distressing symptoms usually improve.

Some people may still be a little more confused or less able than usual to carry out their daily tasks. In a small number of cases, the symptoms do not completely go away.

When planning for a person to leave hospital, the team arrange a follow-up appointment for them. This ensures they receive the right level of support, including rehabilitation. Most people slowly get better, but if you are concerned, speak to your GP.

We encourage patients, relatives and carers to talk openly about their experience following delirium as this may help to speed up the patient's recovery.

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Health and Community Services

Patient Information

Think Delirium

You may find this leaflet helpful if you:

- have experienced delirium
- know someone with delirium
- are looking after someone with delirium

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