

Delirium in the elderly

Information for families and caregivers



Delirium is common in elderly hospitalized patients. This sheet will help you better understand this problem and how to react if it happens to your loved one.

What is delirium?

It is a state of confusion in which a person loses contact with reality. Their behaviour changes rapidly. Often, their families and friends say they no longer recognize them.

What causes it?

Delirium often has several causes. The most common are:

- an infection
- a chronic illness that is getting worse
- an operation
- a change in medication
- lack of water (dehydration)

In an elderly person, these situations can put enough stress on the body to interfere with brain function.



What are the symptoms?

- > Not knowing where they are
- > Losing the sense of time
- > No longer recognizing certain loved ones
- > Making inappropriate comments
- > Hearing, seeing, or sensing things that aren't there (hallucinations)
- > Reacting more slowly than usual or being more agitated
- > Having problems with memory or attention
- > Having trouble doing normal activities

These symptoms can change over the course of the day.

Being delirious is a bit like living in a waking dream. Reality and fiction mingle. The person may feel misunderstood and unable to understand others. All this is stressful and can make them want to protect themselves or run away.

Delirium is a temporary condition. It is NOT a sign of Alzheimer's disease or of depression.

How long does delirium last?

Most symptoms disappear in less than 2 weeks. Some can take longer.

How should I react with my loved one if he or she is delirious?

Here are some tips:

- > Be calm and reassuring.
- > Introduce yourself before touching them.
- > Talk slowly about topics they like, using simple, short sentences. If they say strange or hurtful things, don't take those personally.
- > Try to change the subject.
- > To reassure them, tell them they're safe.

If your loved one is having hallucinations, tell a member of the health team quickly.



What can I do to help my loved one in the hospital?

Keep visiting them

- > Your presence is the most reassuring thing for them. It lowers the stress of being in the hospital.

Make sure they can see and hear well

- > If they have glasses or a hearing aid, make sure they are using them.

Help to create a calm and reassuring environment

- > Keep the noise level down in the room.
- > During the day, keep the room brightly lit.
- > Encourage them to do routine activities.

Give them points of reference and stimulate them

- > Remind them they are in the hospital and why. Occasionally remind them what time it is and the day of the week. Place a calendar near them.
- > Put a photo that they know within their view.
- > Talk about things that interest them.
- > Bring them something to read.
- > Read to them sometimes.



Looking after a loved one in delirium can be a difficult experience. The healthcare team is there to advise you. Don't hesitate to call on them.

Encourage them to move

- > Encourage them to walk and do their daily activities.
- > For some simple exercises, see the fact sheet [Staying active in the hospital](#).



What will the healthcare team do?

Like you, they will mainly use simple, daily, repeated actions. They will also try to find and treat the causes of the delirium. Different approaches can help to calm the person in delirium.

The healthcare team will surely ask you questions to learn more about your loved one. Together you will find the best ways to help them.

Can there be any other effects?

Most often, delirium has no other effects. If there are any, the healthcare team can suggest ways to make the return home easier. If needed, they will recommend follow-up.

Who can I contact if I have questions?

If you have questions, contact any member of the healthcare team.

After the return home, if any symptoms of delirium occur again, it's important to talk about it with a health professional.



USEFUL RESOURCES

L'appui pour les proches aidants d'âinés (Support for caregivers of older adults):

- > lappui.org/en
- > Caregiver support line 1 855 852-7784

Other health sheets published by the CHUM are available. Ask for those that might fit your situation.



You can also find them on our web site chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante



NOTEPAD



Questions



Resource people and contacts

The content of this document in no way replaces the recommendations and diagnoses made, or the treatment suggested by your health professional.

To find out more about the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal
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