

Delirium

Information for families and caregivers



Sometimes a person in the hospital will have an episode of delirium, especially if they are older. This often happens after an operation or during a stay in the intensive care unit. This sheet will help you better understand this problem and know how to react if it happens to your loved one.

What is delirium?

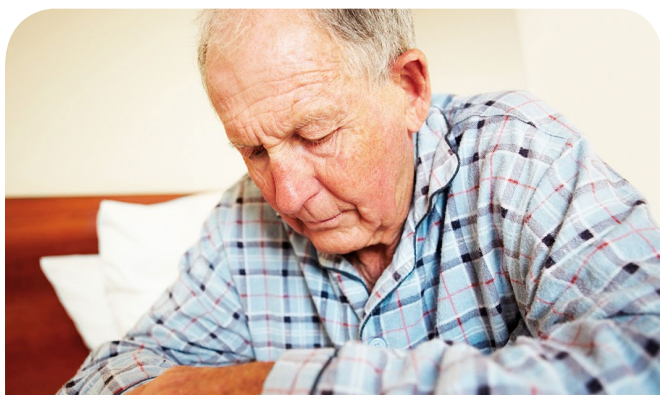
It is a state of confusion in which a person loses contact with reality. Their behaviour changes rapidly. Often, their families and friends say they no longer recognize them.

What causes it?

Delirium often has several causes. Some of the most common are:

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

In someone who is hospitalized, intense stress on the body can interfere with brain function.



What are the symptoms?

- > Not knowing where they are
- > Losing their 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 attention or memory
- > 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 are mixed up. 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 usually 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 they are 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.



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.

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

Keep visiting them

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

Encourage them to drink and eat

- > Ask the nurse what food you can bring them.

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 have a daily routine of activities (such as for personal hygiene).

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 their family and topics that interest them.
- > Bring them something to read or read to them.
- > Play cards, colour in colouring books, watch movies, listen to music.

In intensive care, they should not be too stimulated. Talk with the healthcare team to choose good activities.

Encourage them to move

- > Encourage them to walk, and walk with them. However, if your loved one is in intensive care, it's important just to encourage them and leave it to the healthcare team to help them move.
- > 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 after-effects?

Most often, delirium has no after-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?

Don't hesitate to raise questions with any member of the healthcare team.

After the return home, call a Health Patient CHUM Hotline nurse, at **514 890-8086**, if any symptoms of delirium occur again.



USEFUL RESOURCES

- Support for caregivers of older adults:
- > **Caregiver support line: 1 855 852-7784**
 - > lappui.org/en

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



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



Questions

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 chumontreal.qc.ca

