

Delirium Information for Patients and Carers

This leaflet provides information for people affected by delirium and their carers.

What is Delirium?

Delirium is a condition where people have increased confusion, difficulty concentrating and changes in their thinking. It is very common with about 1 in 10 patients being affected during their hospital stay. These changes tend to come on quickly, over hours to days and tend to fluctuate in severity throughout the course of the day, often being worse at night. If you notice a change in your relatives or friends' behaviour, please inform the nurse in charge of their care. Delirium may be the reason why you or your relative has been admitted to hospital or may develop during a hospital stay.

Who gets Delirium?

Anyone can develop delirium but certain things put people at higher risk:

- Old age
- Frailty
- Hearing or visual impairment
- Dementia or pre-existing memory problems
- Being in hospital with a serious illness or broken hip

What are the symptoms?

People with delirium may:

- Struggle to think clearly
- Have trouble concentrating, for example following a conversation
- Not be aware of what is going on around them or of where they are
- Hallucinate (see or hear things which are not there)
- Have problems with recent memory
- Become more active; agitated, feel the need to wander or even become aggressive
- Become less active; withdrawn, quiet or even drowsy

What causes it?

Most cases of delirium have several causes acting together.

Common causes include:

- Infection – this is a common cause, but not always the cause.
- Not eating or drinking enough (leading to dehydration and malnutrition)
- Constipation
- Being in a new or strange place (especially the very busy hospital environment)
- Pain
- Urinary retention (being unable to pass urine)
- Alcohol use or withdrawal
- Surgical problem (e.g., gallstones) or surgery itself
- Medication (e.g. morphine, codeine)

Sometimes quite minor illness e.g. constipation and dehydration can result in significant delirium, especially in those who may have pre-existing memory problems.

Do all patients with delirium need admission to hospital?

Not necessarily. Being in your own environment with people, routines and surroundings that you know is likely to improve recovery from delirium. The decision on whether someone can be looked after in their usual environment depends on the cause of delirium, the support available to them at home, and the wishes of the patient and caregivers. If it is possible to manage the patient at home, this may be preferable.

What tests are needed?

Delirium can be diagnosed by reviewing the symptoms and performing a test of memory and concentration. The 4AT test (www.the4at.com) is commonly used. Gathering more information, performing an examination and carrying out further tests e.g. blood tests or urine tests, can help identify causes of delirium. Occasionally a CT scan of the brain may be needed if a stroke or bleed on the brain is suspected.

How is Delirium treated?

Delirium is treated by treating the underlying causes and at the same time ensuring we avoid anything that would make it worse.

Things that can help include:

- Ensuring good hydration and nutrition
- Avoiding unnecessary ward moves
- Avoiding the use of a urinary catheter if possible (although sometimes this is needed to treat incomplete emptying of the bladder)
- Avoiding constipation developing
- Reviewing and changing medications which may be part of the cause

What can help if someone becomes agitated or aggressive?

Delirium can be frightening for those affected and they can become agitated and aggressive. Being reassured by people they know can really help and you may be asked as a carer to help by sitting with the patient to help them remain calm.

If you would like to stay for longer periods with the person there are options to do this, please speak to the nurse in charge of the ward.

Some people become so agitated that they are at risk of harming themselves or others. Medications known as sedatives may then be needed. These are only used when necessary, in the lowest possible doses and for short periods.

They will only be used in the following situations:

- To protect patients or others from harm
- To carry out essential tests
- To give essential treatments

How can I help?

As a relative or carer you can do lots to help:

- Stay calm and reassure them
- Talk in clear short, simple sentences, repeat things if necessary
- Limit the number of visitors at one time
- Remind them of the time and date
- Bring them a clock, calendar or newspaper
- Bring some familiar things or photos from home and talk about them
- Make sure they have their glasses and hearing aid
- Make sure the room is bright and well lit
- Ask the nurses if you can help at meal times
- When you visit help them drink and bring them foods they enjoy
- Explain what is happening to them and their progress
- Share this leaflet with them
- If they have hallucinations, reassure them, explain they are not real. If they insist the hallucinations are real, do not argue with them as this may make matters worse.

If your relative has Dementia, or memory problems, ask the ward team to help you complete a 'This is Me' document; this will help the team to communicate better with your relative and understand their care needs more fully.

It can be distressing to have a friend or relative who is delirious. They may fail to recognise you or behave out of character. Despite this it is important you continue to visit if you can, and hopefully they will improve and respond to your visits.

Who are the Liaison Mental Health Team?

Delirium is generally managed by the clinical team looking after the patient. However sometimes the team need the expert opinion of mental health specialists based in the hospital called Liaison Mental Health Teams. They help ensure that patients with both physical and mental health problems (such as delirium) receive timely, safe and effective care during their hospital stay. They may wish to speak with carers or relatives so may contact you.

How long will it take to get better?

People usually make a full recovery from delirium and this starts to happen a few days after treatment. It may take several weeks to fully recover, particularly for those with pre-existing dementia. Some people with delirium do not return to their previous level of mental or physical function, depending on the underlying cause. This may particularly be the case in those who are frail or have dementia.

As they recover, the patient may recall that they were 'confused' or 'behaved oddly'. They will need an explanation of what happened and reassurance. If their memories of delirium are frightening, it is important to discuss them and provide reassurance by going through events with them, explaining the nature and the causes of their delirium. However, many people may not remember anything about their period of delirium; this is more likely to be the case if they have an underlying dementia.

Occasionally an episode of delirium may be a trigger for revealing underlying long term memory problems and an assessment of dementia maybe made when the patient has recovered. The ward team will work with you to plan a safe discharge where delirium is taking longer to resolve. Some people with delirium continue to have symptoms. This can be a sign of early dementia so the clinical team will refer some patients for a full assessment at the memory clinic.

Further information

If you (or the person you care for) have been affected by delirium and you would like more information then please contact the nurse in charge of the ward, who will be happy to answer your questions or direct you to the most appropriate member of the team who can.

Information available on the internet:

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) information for people with delirium, carers and those at risk of delirium.

<http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/CG103/InformationForPublic>

Royal College of Psychiatrists information leaflet:

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/problemsdisorders/delirium.aspx>

Dementia UK: www.dementiauk.org

Alzheimer's Society: www.alzheimers.org.uk

The Queen Elizabeth Hospital King's Lynn NHS Foundation Trust

Feedback

We appreciate and encourage feedback. If you need advice or are concerned about any aspect of care or treatment, please speak to a member of staff or contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS):

Telephone: 01553 613351 or 01553 613343

Email: pals@qehkl.nhs.uk

Letter: PALS, The Queen Elizabeth Hospital King's Lynn NHS Foundation Trust, Gayton Road, King's Lynn PE30 4ET

The Trust endeavours to ensure that the information given here is accurate and impartial.

Norfolk and Norwich University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

We aim to provide the best care for every patient. So, we would like your feedback on the quality of the care you have received from the Hospital. Please visit:

<http://ratenhs.uk/IQu9vx> Or scan QR code:



James Paget University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

Patient Information Leaflet for Delirium

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The Queen Elizabeth Hospital King's Lynn NHS Foundation Trust Integrated Care of the Older Person

This document can be provided in different languages and formats.
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Norfolk and Norwich University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust Older Peoples Medicine

This document can be provided in different languages and formats.
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