

How is delirium different from dementia?

Dementia develops over the course of years with a slow progression of cognitive decline. Delirium develops rapidly over the course of hours to days with symptoms fluctuating throughout the course of a day. The main symptoms of delirium that differentiate it from dementia are inability to focus on one idea or task and disturbed consciousness.

Early warning signs of delirium

If your loved one doesn't appear to know where they are, who they are or who you are, can't do things they normally do and seem confused then get them to a doctor for further assessment as quickly as possible.

Please speak to the treating doctor if you would like more information about the cause and prognosis of your loved one's delirium.

Resources

For more about delirium:

www.delirium.org.au/community-info

www.dementia.org.au/files/helpsheets/Helpsheet-DementiaQandA21_Delirium_english.pdf

For more about dementia:

Dementia Australia www.dementia.org.au

Contact details

Ipswich Hospital
Psychology Services
PO Box 73
Ipswich QLD 4305

Ph: (07) 3810 1111

www.westmoreton.health.qld.gov.au

Interpreter Services

Available 24 hours a day, seven days a week at no charge. Please contact our staff for assistance.



Delirium

Information for carers and family



What is delirium?

Delirium is a life threatening but preventable condition that is usually triggered by a medical cause. However, in vulnerable patients such as those with advanced age or pre-existing dementia, delirium can occur with minor insults, such as changes in medication, constipation, dehydration and a change of environment. It develops quickly over hours or days and is characterised by a sudden and severe change in brain function. This results in a fluctuating course of altered level of consciousness, difficulty maintaining focus and confusion.

Signs to look for in your loved one:

- Confused, disorientated and forgetful
- Rambling, incoherent or absent speech
- Fluctuations in alertness, mood and energy levels
- Quiet, drowsy, lethargic, not wanting to eat or drink
- Agitated, irritable or combative
- Seeing or hearing things that others may not see or hear
- Thinking people are going to hurt them or falsely believing something is occurring
- Looking terrified, scared or tearful
- Changes in sleep wake routine (staying awake in the night and sleeping during the day)

What can you do to help someone with delirium?

You can provide supportive cares to your loved one by doing the following:

- Speak with a calm, soft tone and use their name
- Help orientate by reminding them who they are and where they are
- Make them feel at home by bringing them personal mementos such as favourite clothing, photos and music
- Encourage regular eating, drinking, walks, toileting
- Help them use their glasses or hearing aids
- Open curtains during the day to increase natural sunlight to promote normal sleep-wake cycle
- Inform staff about personal information that might help calm or orient them including names of family, friends, pets, hobbies, significant events and previous occupations
- Provide gentle reassurance they are safe
- Avoid arguing

Delirium is a condition that requires medical attention for treatment. When you notice signs of delirium, keep the person safe and seek medical attention.

How is delirium treated?

- Doctors will treat the medical condition causing the delirium
- All medications will be reviewed and appropriate changes made
- Verbal reassurance, re-orientation and meeting needs of basic daily living is encouraged
- Occasionally medications may be used to calm a delirious patient if they are severely agitated

Things you can do to reduce the risk of delirium:

- Help the patient maintain good hygiene to avoid infection including hand washing and regularly changing continence aids
- Maintain adequate intake of food and water
- Make sure they get enough sleep
- Take them into natural light
- Encourage stimulating conversations and activities to keep them socially engaged
- Encourage physical activity

