

## Information Booklet

# What is Delirium?

for patients and  
families/carers



**Safe** | **Personal** | **Effective**

# What is delirium?



Delirium is a sign that someone is physically unwell.

Delirium is also known as being in an 'acute confusional state'.

It is a sudden change over a few hours or days. It affects how alert someone is and their concentration levels. At other times they can seem their normal selves.



People who become delirious can behave in ways that are unusual for them; they may become more agitated than normal, withdrawn or feel more sleepy.



It may be more difficult to talk with them properly, or they may ramble and jump from one topic to another.

They may not know where they are, or think they are somewhere different.



Sometimes people who are delirious may see things that are not really there or believe things that are not true.

# Who can get delirium?

Anyone of any age can get delirium, but it is more common in older people.



People with dementia are more likely to get delirium and cannot always explain what is wrong or how they are feeling.

Around 30% of all elderly patients admitted to hospital will suffer from delirium throughout their stay.

# What causes delirium?



The most common causes of delirium:  
Remember - '**PINCH ME**'

**P**ain (and unable to sleep or move around)

**I**nfection (chest, urine, skin etc)

**C**onstipation (or unable to pass urine properly)

**H**ydration (dehydration and malnutrition)

**M**edication (sudden stopping or starting drugs)

**E**nvironment (being in an unfamiliar place)

Sometimes there can be one or more cause, and at other times the cause is not always clear.



## Is a brain scan required?



Brain scans do not usually help to explain the cause of delirium.

Doctors may request a scan if someone has had a recent head injury.

## How is delirium treated?

The best treatment for delirium is to treat the cause.

Things that are known to cause or make the delirium worse should be avoided.

If the person suffering from delirium is clearly agitated or restless it may help for someone familiar to sit with them.

Sedative medication is only used as a last resort and given at the lowest dose for the shortest time possible, because it can often make delirium worse.





You can support someone with delirium by:

- Be calm and patient, talk to them in short and easy to understand sentences.
- Remind them where they are and who you are.
- Give them lots of reassurance.
- Encourage them to eat, and to drink plenty of water.
- Do not argue with them.
- If they wear hearing aids or glasses, ensure they are used and check that they are working correctly.
- Bring in some familiar photographs or small objects from home.
- Avoid over-stimulation from too many visitors.





Delirium will improve when the known cause is treated.

Delirium usually only takes days to improve, but can take weeks or months in some people, especially those with dementia.



If a person has one episode of delirium, they are more likely to have another episode in the future.



For some people the symptoms may never go away and this could be an early sign of dementia.

Some people may not remember what it was like to have delirium, especially if they already have problems with their memory.



Other people can be left with frightening memories, some people worry they are developing dementia or going mad.

# What should I do if I am worried about my relative or friend?



Talk to a member of staff if you are worried about your relative or friend.

If you notice that someone has become more confused than usual, it is important you tell a member of staff so they get the care and treatment they need.

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If you would like to speak to someone about Delirium please speak to a member of staff on the ward or contact your GP.

For more information go to [www.elht.nhs.uk](http://www.elht.nhs.uk)

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