

Pacific Regional Centre for Healthy Aging

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Delirium

What is Delirium?

If someone suddenly becomes confused, has trouble thinking, and starts behaving in unusual ways, that might be delirium. Medical experts call it a 'neurocognitive decline' that is temporary ("neuro" refers to the brain, and "cognitive" to thinking).

Delirium isn't an illness. It's a collection of symptoms caused by one or more health problems. It can be dangerous and needs to be treated.

Delirium can happen at any age but is most common in older adults.

Knowing how to recognize and deal with delirium helps prevent it. If delirium does happen to you or someone close to you, a quick response can prevent long-term complications. This can help an older adult stay independent longer, stay active, and continue to enjoy life.

What are the Signs of Delirium?

Delirium happens suddenly, over several hours. The symptoms come and go and are usually worse at night.

A person experiencing delirium has a hard time making sense of what is happening around them. They might

- Have trouble paying attention (or only pay attention to one thing)
- Not be able to follow a conversation
- Not make sense when they talk
- See or hear things that other people do not see or hear
- Seem nervous or scared or believe people are trying to hurt them
- Be restless or angry
- Be very quiet and withdrawn
- Have trouble sleeping at night and staying awake during the day
- Not know where they are

How is Delirium Different From Dementia?

Delirium is a set of symptoms which often. Dementia is a type of brain disease. Delirium symptoms can vary over a short period of time and then disappear, while dementia is a disease that progresses very gradually and does not improve.

A person with dementia can experience delirium too. Sometimes, delirium can look like dementia. The difference is that delirium comes on quickly. See or talk to a health care provider right away if any of the signs listed above suddenly appear, even if the signs come and go.

Delirium

Comes on suddenly

Symptoms come and go, or change often

Continual trouble paying attention

Is different from the person's regular behaviour

Often occurs in people with dementia

Dementia

Symptoms begin very slowly and do not go away

Gradually gets worse

May have trouble paying attention, but this might go away

Sometimes gets worse in evenings (called sundowning)

A big risk factor for delirium

What Causes Delirium?

Delirium has many causes, and often, more than one cause. Specific events such as a fall, surgery, illness, or a trip to the hospital can bring on delirium. Also, some lifestyle habits, like not eating or drinking enough, can cause delirium. Chronic health conditions also play a role.

Events that can lead to delirium

- Infection or other illness
- Surgery (such as heart, hip, and eye)

- Fall or injury
- A stay in the hospital
- A change in medication (stopping or starting a medication, or changing the dose)
- A change in life situation (death of a loved-one, a new living situation)

Lifestyle habits that can lead to delirium

- Not sleeping well
- Not eating or drinking enough
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Not wearing hearing aids if needed, or having hearing aids that don't fit right
- Not wearing glasses if needed, or having glasses that don't fit right

Other things that can make delirium more likely

- Pain
- Dementia
- Depression
- Had delirium before
- Vision and hearing problems
- A heart, lung, or liver condition
- Prescription medications

How to Prevent Delirium

A healthy lifestyle is the best way to prevent delirium. This includes

- Healthy eating
- Drinking enough fluids
- Staying active
- Doing things that give your life meaning
- Keeping vaccinations up to date
- Getting ears and eyes checked regularly and wearing glasses and hearing aids if you need them
- Staying connected to friends and family
- Seeing health care providers when necessary
- Following instructions for medications and talk to your health care provider if you think your medications are causing problems

How is Delirium Treated?

Treatment Options

There is no single treatment for delirium.

Usually, the health care team will work with the patient and their family to learn about what caused the delirium. Then they will treat that cause. Usually, the delirium goes away. If not, the health care team will look for another cause.

Sometimes, noticing the delirium can save a person's life, because it helps the health care team find and fix a serious illness.

Delirium in the Hospital

The hospital experience can cause delirium or make it worse. Untreated delirium can make recovery much harder. It might be the main reason someone needs to go into a care facility instead of going back home. It could be the reason someone ends up back in hospital soon after they leave.

If you are in hospital and think you are at risk for delirium, ask your hospital if they have a delirium prevention program. If so, ask to be part of it.

Hospital staff play a big role in recognizing and treating delirium, but friends and family can help. Here's what you can do:

- Go to the hospital with older adults and stay with them as much as possible
- If you are waiting with an older adult in an emergency room, make sure they eat, drink water, and stay as comfortable as possible
- Bring them
 - things to remind them of home (for instance, photos, a blanket, food)
 - their glasses, hearing aids and extra batteries, medications, and dentures
- Talk to the health care team about any symptoms that worry you. Because you know what the person is like most of the time, you can notice what's different. You can help the health care team by telling them about the person's usual behaviour, routine, and level of activity at home.

Five Ways Caregivers, Family Members, and Friends Can Help

1. Make sure the older adult gets health care

Delirium is caused by something, and that 'something' needs to be discovered and treated. Make sure the person with delirium gets help from a health care provider

2. Visit often

You can help them feel less anxious, help with their care, and talk to health care providers

3. Talk to them

- Speak quietly and in short, simple sentences
- Ask questions, such as, "Do you feel you're a little off today?" "Are you feeling worried?"
- Gently remind them of the day and time and where they are
- Reassure them that this will go away
- If they are upset or can't understand, move on and talk about other things
- If they are saying things that don't make sense or are not accurate, don't argue. Speak kindly and move the conversation to other things

4. Make them comfortable

- Keep background noise down
- Keep lighting low

- Help them sit up or move around
- Sit them close to a window so the natural light can help regulate their sleep cycles
- Show them familiar objects, like pictures, music, food, or a favourite blanket

5. Keep them healthy

- Encourage them to eat and drink
- Take them outside for a walk if possible
- Encourage them to use glasses and hearing aids if they need them
- Encourage them to do things they enjoy

When to go to the Hospital?

Often, home is the best place for someone experiencing delirium. It is a familiar place where they feel comfortable. But it's important to know when to go to the hospital.

Go to the hospital when:

- A person is physically ill in a way that required help right away, like a stroke or heart attack
- A person is not safe—for instance, they are wandering out of the house or in danger of falling
- A person is acting in an aggressive way that could be dangerous for themselves or others

Delirium Statistics

In hospital

- 50% of older persons may develop delirium
- 40-50% of older persons develop delirium after hip surgery
- 70% of persons 65+ admitted to intensive care develop delirium

In residential care

- 22-89% of residents with dementia experience delirium

Resources

Websites

[Confusion, Memory Loss, and Altered Consciousness](#)

Advice on prevention and response from HealthLinkBC

Videos

[Delirium in the Older Person](#)

This webpage from Island Health includes two award-winning videos about delirium

Booklets and Fact Sheets

[Delirium Prevention and Care with Older Adults](#)

A short and very helpful booklet from the Canadian Coalition for Seniors' Mental Health

[Delirium in the Older Adult: A Family Guide—English version](#)

A two-page fact sheet covering basic information in English

[Delirium in the Older Adult: A Family Guide—Punjabi version](#)

A two-page fact sheet covering basic information in Punjabi

Phone Support

Call 811 for 24/7 help

This will connect you to [HealthLinkBC's health service navigators](#). They can answer basic health care questions and help you find your way around the health care system.

- Call 8-1-1 (7-1-1 for the deaf and hard of hearing)
- Available 24 hours a day, seven days a week
- Translation services are available in over 130 languages
- For non-emergency situations only