



THE 2 D's

Comparison between DELIRIUM and DEMENTIA

	Delirium	Dementia
Definition	An acute or sudden onset of mental confusion as a result of a medical, social, or environmental condition.	Progressive loss of brain cells resulting in decline of day-to-day cognition and functioning. A terminal condition.
Duration	Hours to months, dependant on speed of diagnosis.	Years (usually 8 to 20)
Thinking	Fluctuates between rational state and disorganized, distorted thinking with incoherent speech	Gradual loss of cognition and ability to problem solve and function independently.
Mental status testing	Testing may vary from poor to good depending of time of day and fluctuation in cognition.	Will attempt to answer and will not be aware of mistakes.
Memory	Recent and immediate memory impaired.	Inability to learn new information or to recall previously learned information
Sleep-wake cycle	Disturbed, and sleep-wake cycle is reversed (up in night, very sleepy and sometimes non-responsive during the day)	Normal to fragmented
Hallucinations and delusions	Often of a frightening or paranoid nature	Can be present. May misperceive. In Lewy body dementia, visual hallucinations present.
Diagnosis	Diagnosis based on rapid onset of fluctuating symptoms. Can be mistaken for dementia progression.	Usually diagnosed approximately 3 years after onset of symptoms. Must rule out other cause of cognitive decline, e.g., depression or delirium.
Care approaches	Early recognition is key. Keep person safe, find cause of the delirium and treat as quickly as possible	Maintain and enhance abilities that remain. Focus on the positive and support the lost abilities.
Prognosis	Treatable and reversible, especially if caught early	Progression can be slowed but not reversed.
Treatment	Treat cause. Monitor response. Be alert for relapse.	Cholinesterase inhibitors slow the progression of some dementias. Symptomatic treatment with environmental and staff approaches.

Adapted from: Forman, MD & Zane, D. (1996). Nursing strategies for acute confusion in elders. *American Journal of Nursing*, 96(4), 44-51; Lipowski, Z. (1989). Delirium in the elderly patient. *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 320(9), 578-582.