

## What is delirium?

Delirium is a sudden, temporary onset of confusion that causes changes in the way people think and behave. Older people are most at risk. Knowing what to look for and treating the causes early can help save lives.

## What causes delirium?

- Infection
- Medication side-effects
- Not taking medications as prescribed
- Recent surgery with anaesthetic
- Worsening of a chronic illness
- Dehydration
- Poor nutrition
- High or low blood sugar
- Constipation or diarrhea
- Pain
- Alcohol use or withdrawal
- Recent injury or fall
- Recent move or hospital stay
- Grief over a recent loss, for example death of a family member, friend, or pet
- Poor fitting hearing aids or glasses
- Low blood levels of Vitamin B12

## What puts someone at risk for getting delirium?

People are more likely to get delirium if they have:

- Had delirium before
- Memory or thinking problems
- Severe illness resulting in hospital stays
- Dehydration
- Problems with seeing or hearing, or
- Are taking 5 or more medications

## What are the signs of delirium?

- Confusion
- Restlessness
- Being upset
- Slurred speech
- Not making any sense
- Seeing or hearing things that are not there
- Mixing up days and nights
- Drifting between sleep and being awake
- Forgetting things
- Trouble concentrating
- More alert than normal
- Not knowing where they are
- Trouble staying awake

## How is delirium diagnosed?

Delirium is diagnosed by:

- Noticing signs of delirium
- Learning the person's medical history
- Learning the person's usual thinking ability, daily routines, communication style, moods, behaviours and sleep habits.
- Doing a physical examination.
- Doing blood, urine, and X-ray tests to find the cause.

## How is delirium treated?

Treating delirium means treating the underlying cause. It is very important to figure out the cause of delirium as soon as possible. This usually means doing tests and asking questions. Once the cause is known, the most effective treatment can be given. This may include medication as well as changing the person's surroundings.

For many people, delirium can clear in a few days or weeks. Others may not respond to treatment for many weeks. Some people never fully return

to their normal selves. You may see some problems with memory and thinking that do not go away. Each person is different.

## **What can you do to help?**

### **1. Learn about delirium**

- Know the signs of delirium listed in this handout.
- Tell the doctor or other health care team member if you notice any signs of delirium.
- Understand that delirium is not dementia. Dementia is the gradual loss of brain cells over time that results in decline of day-to-day thinking. Dementia cannot be cured.

### **2. Support healthy rest and sleep by:**

- Reducing noise and distractions.
- Keeping light low or off when resting.
- Improving comfort with a pillow, blanket, warm drink or back rub.
- Not using sleeping pills if possible.

### **3. Support physical activity by:**

- Helping with sitting and walking.
- Talking with the health care team about safe exercise and activities.

### **4. Support healthy eating and drinking by:**

- Encouraging and helping with eating.
- Offering fluids often.

### **5. Support good hearing by:**

- Encouraging the wearing of hearing aides.
- Making sure hearing aides are working.

## 6. Support good seeing by:

- Encouraging the wearing of glasses or use a magnifying glass.
- Keeping glasses clean.
- Using good lighting.

## 7. Support mental stimulation by:

- Arranging for familiar people to visit.
- Keeping sentences short and simple.
- Gently reminding them where they are and what is happening. Please do not argue with them.
- Talking about current events and what is going on around the person.
- Reading out loud or using large print or talking books.
- Bringing in a clock, calendar or pictures from home.

## Where can I learn more?

Delirium resources on the VIHA Website:

[www.viha.ca/mhas/resources/delirium/](http://www.viha.ca/mhas/resources/delirium/)

**HealthLinkBC** - Health advice you can trust 24/7.

Tel: 8.1.1 from anywhere in BC.

Tel: 7.1.1 for deaf and hearing-impaired assistance (TTY)

Web: [www.HealthLinkBC.ca](http://www.HealthLinkBC.ca)

**The information in this handout is intended only for the person it was given to by the health care team. It does not replace the advice or directions given to you by your doctor.**