

Bradford Teaching Hospitals **NHS**

NHS Foundation Trust



Delirium

Information for
relatives and carers

What is delirium?

Delirium is a condition where people have increased confusion, changes in thinking and a reduced attention span. Symptoms can develop quickly and often fluctuate during the day.

Delirium is also known as 'acute confusion'. It is curable - but if it is undetected then it can be a life-threatening condition.

How common is delirium?

It is quite common - it affects around 1 in 10 patients in hospital. It can affect anyone of any age. Delirium is more common for people in certain situations, for example, if they need intensive care, have a hip fracture, or have had surgery to their arteries or veins. It is also more likely to affect older people being treated for a medical condition.

What are the symptoms of delirium?

People are affected in different ways but people with delirium can:

- become restless, agitated or aggressive
- be withdrawn, quiet or more sleepy
- be less aware of what is going on around them or where they are
- struggle to think clearly
- find it hard to concentrate, for example keeping track of a conversation
- hear or see things that aren't there
- have vivid dreams
- be more confused at certain times of day, especially evenings and night time
- feel an urge to wander around
- suddenly not be able to control their bladder or bowel movements

Who gets delirium?

It can happen to anyone but there are some things that put a person at higher risk of it. These include:

- Older age
- A diagnosis of dementia
- Having a lot of other health problems
- Being in hospital with a broken hip or serious illness

If someone has a dementia, the symptoms of delirium can sometimes be mistaken for the dementia getting worse, but it is important to recognise and treat delirium in its own right.

What causes delirium?

Delirium has many causes. Often more than one thing causes it to develop. Some causes are:

- Infection (e.g. urine or chest infection)
- Dehydration or malnutrition - not eating or drinking enough
- Pain
- Medicines (e.g. codeine, morphine, diazepam)
- Constipation
- Being unable to pass urine
- Surgical problems (e.g. appendicitis)
- Being in an unfamiliar place
- Alcohol use or withdrawal

How is delirium diagnosed?

Delirium is diagnosed by identifying that the symptoms of it are present, and can't be explained in other ways. In this hospital we screen patients over 65 years old for possible delirium by asking a relative or carer if the patient has become more confused over the last 3 days.

If delirium is suspected tests will be carried out to look for possible causes. For example blood tests, urine tests, a heart tracing (ECG) and X-rays. If you notice symptoms of delirium please let a doctor or nurse know immediately. You may wish to show them this leaflet to help to explain your concerns.

Is a brain scan needed?

Brain scans don't usually help to find a cause for delirium so they are not usually needed. In some situations a brain scan may be helpful, for example, after a head injury.

How is delirium treated?

There is evidence that delirium can be prevented by targeting the potential causes. For example, avoiding unnecessary urinary catheterisation to reduce risk of infection, avoiding constipation and encouraging good food and fluid intake. Any drugs that may be contributing to delirium should be reviewed. Ward and bed moves should be avoided wherever possible.

How can relatives and carers help someone with delirium?

- keep calm and speak in short, easy to understand sentences
- remind them where they are and why they are there
- reassure them
- don't argue with them
- remind them of the date and time, and make sure they can see a clock and calendar if possible
- make sure they have their usual glasses and hearing aids and use them
- encourage them to eat and drink - bring them food /drinks they like if this helps
- bring in some familiar photos or objects from home
- limit the number of visitors and reduce noise as much as possible - stimulating the person too much can make things worse

If someone has delirium and is behaving aggressively, what will help?

We aim to treat the symptoms that cause delirium because these can contribute to aggressive behaviour. It can help if relatives and carers can come in and sit with the patient to help calm them down. You might be invited to do this.

If the person is very aggressive and may be a risk to themselves or others then they might be prescribed some medicine for a short time to help calm them down. This type of medicine is called a sedative. This is a last resort and will only be used:

- so that essential tests can be done
- to give essential treatments
- to protect the patient or others from harm

If this type of medicine is needed the lowest possible dose will be given for the shortest possible time.

How long does delirium take to get better?

Once the cause of the delirium is found and treated, most people start to improve within a few days. For a small number of people delirium may take weeks, or occasionally even months, to get better. People who also have dementia are more likely to take longer to get better.

Some people who have delirium might continue to have symptoms. This might be a sign of early dementia. If so, the person's GP will be asked to refer the patient to the memory clinic for a full assessment.

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

This leaflet has been produced to give you general information about delirium. If you have any other questions please do not hesitate to discuss this with a member of the healthcare team who has been caring for your friend or relative.

For more information about delirium:

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) information for people with delirium, carers and those at risk of delirium.

<http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/CG103/InformationForPublic>

Royal College of Psychiatrists information leaflet:

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/problemsdisorders/delirium.aspx>

By Textphone

We use the BT Text Relay service for patients who are deaf or have hearing difficulties. To contact us ring 18001 01274 383562

Smoking

Bradford Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust is a smoke-free organisation. You are not permitted to smoke in any of the hospital buildings or grounds, with the exception of the smoking shelters which are provided for visitors and patients only.

Wristbands

When you are in hospital it is essential to wear a wristband at all times to ensure your safety during your stay.

The wristband will contain accurate details about you on it including all of the essential information that staff need to identify you correctly and give you the right care. All hospital patients including babies, children and older people should wear the wristband at all times.

If you do not have a wristband whilst in hospital, then please ask a member of staff for one. If it comes off or is uncomfortable, ask a member of staff to replace it.

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