

Understanding Delirium

In this material, we will explore the various aspects of delirium to help you better understand and manage the condition.

Defining Delirium

Delirium is an acute change in mental function that often comes on within hours or days. Individuals may experience sudden confusion, disorientation, have trouble paying attention and difficulties with memory. It is not a disease itself, but a sign that something is affecting how the brain works.

Types of Delirium

There are three main types of delirium:

1. Hypoactive: Being quieter and sleeps more than usual
2. Hyperactive: Being confused, agitated and restless
3. Mixed: Having both features of hypoactive and hyperactive delirium

How Delirium Differs from Other Cognitive Conditions

- Delirium is distinct from conditions like dementia or cognitive impairment, as it typically has a rapid onset and usually gets better when the underlying cause is treated.
- Delirium also presents with fluctuating levels of alertness and cognitive functioning, which makes it different from other cognitive conditions.

Signs and Symptoms of Delirium

Understanding the signs and symptoms associated with delirium is crucial for recognising and managing the condition effectively.

Confusion



Feeling confused and struggling to understand their surrounding

Disorientation



Not knowing where they are or what time or day it is

Hallucinations and Delusions



Seeing or believing things that are not real

Agitation



Has changes in sleep patterns, experiences restlessness, anxiety and difficult emotions

Difficulties with Memory and Attention



Difficulty staying focused and having difficulties in remembering events

Causes and Risk Factors of Delirium

Delirium can be triggered by various factors, including medical conditions, medications or stress. Identifying the cause of delirium is crucial in ensuring healthcare professionals are providing the right help. Similarly, understanding the factors that increase the risk of developing delirium can allow individuals and their caregivers to be more vigilant when faced with similar circumstances.

Common Causes	<p>Delirium can happen for various reasons, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consuming certain type of medications• Infections like a urinary tract infection or pneumonia• Health problems, such as heart or lung issues• Dehydration from not drinking enough water• Pain or discomfort• Organ dysfunction or injury• Constipation and urinary retention• Alcohol use or withdrawal
Risk Factors	<p>Some factors can increase the risk of delirium, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Being older• Having physical weakness or immobility• Already having depression and/or problems with memory or thinking, like dementia or other cognitive impairments• Frequent change in environment• Having trouble seeing or hearing well• Staying in the hospital or having surgery

Treatment and Management Approaches for Delirium

Management of delirium primarily focuses on addressing the underlying cause or trigger. This may involve treating infections, adjusting medications or alleviating pain. A team of healthcare professionals, including doctors, nurses, and therapists, may be involved in the care of individuals with delirium.

Medications

In some cases, medications may be prescribed by doctors to treat the underlying cause of delirium (i.e. prescribing antibiotic to the patient if the delirium is caused by infection) or to manage specific symptoms such as pain, mood disturbances or behavioural issues (e.g., aggression). Some medications (i.e. olanzapine, haloperidol or midazolam) are prescribed to calm someone with delirium and aggression down and enables them to rest more.

Delirium may be induced or worsened by certain medications, hence healthcare providers will review a patient's medication regimen and make the necessary adjustments. Reducing or discontinuing medications that contribute to delirium is a common strategy.



What can you do to help your loved one?

Being a caregiver, you play a vital role in your loved one's journey. Here are some tips to help you provide care to your loved one more effectively.

Orientate

It is common for individuals with delirium to feel confused and disoriented.

- Use clocks and calendars:
 - Have visible clocks and calendars in your loved one's surroundings so that they can orientate themselves to the time and date.
- Provide reminders:
 - Provide gentle reminders to your loved one of their current situation, location and the date and time if needed.



Environment

Delirium symptoms can worsen in noisy and chaotic environments.

- Create calming and familiar environment:
 - Minimise noise and commotion.
 - Have familiar objects, pictures and personal items (e.g. pillow, bolster) in the surrounding.
 - Play familiar music that your loved one enjoys to help them feel more at ease.
 - A peaceful and familiar environment can provide a sense of comfort and security for your loved one.

Medication Compliance

Ensure that your loved one takes their medication as prescribed to calm them down in order to have adequate rest.



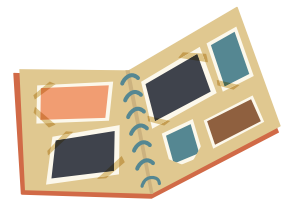
Sit out of Bed

Engage your loved one in the day by sitting out in a chair. Regular movement and exercise help to improve circulation, strength, balance and stamina.



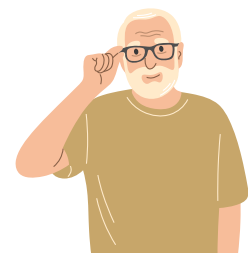
Engage with Activities

Engage your loved one with simple activities, such as colouring, reading a book, going through past photos or discussing pleasant memories. This serves to redirect the focus and reduce anxiety.



See and Hear

Ensure that your loved one uses their own glasses and hearing aid to minimise sensory impairment.



Get Enough Sleep

Ensure that your loved one get enough rest. Maintain healthy sleep-wake pattern and avoid caffeine after lunch.



Stay Hydrated and Well-Nourished

Dehydration and malnutrition can worsen the symptoms of delirium. Ensure your loved one drinks sufficient water and obtain proper nutrition for overall well-being.



Reassurance and Support

It is common for individuals with delirium to experience fear and anxiety due to confusion and a change in their mental ability.

Visit your beloved one often if possible. Having a comforting presence (e.g., caregiver, trusted family member or friend) can offer comfort and reassurance to your loved one. This can help ease their distress and provide a sense of security.



Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about Delirium

Is delirium the same as dementia?

Delirium is different from dementia. Delirium is typically temporary, with sudden onset and fluctuating symptoms. Dementia is a chronic and progressive cognitive disorder with a gradual decline in mental abilities.

How long does delirium typically last?

Delirium can last from a few days to several weeks. Recovery from delirium depends on addressing the underlying causes and the timeliness of intervention.

Delirium can be a distressing experience, but with proper recognition, intervention, and support, there is hope for recovery. You are not alone in this journey. Seek help, stay informed, and approach with compassion and support, both for yourself and your loved one.

Contributed by Nursing and Psychology (Allied Health Services)

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