

Delirium

Delirium is an acute / sudden change in the mental state of your loved one that causes a person to appear confused or disorientated and it happens commonly in the very ill and the elderly. The person with delirium will have difficulties maintaining focus, thinking clearly, remembering recent events, appearing agitated or drowsy, typically with a fluctuating course. Delirium can develop within a few hours, to days or weeks.

Delirium is usually caused by an acute illness, like an infection, worsening organ function, stroke or heart attack, use of certain medications, alcohol use or withdrawal from alcohol etc. A person with delirium will need a full evaluation by the medical team for the causes of delirium.

Delirium is a common cause for elderly to be admitted to hospital and delirium may also develop during the hospital stay. Early identification and treatment is important as delirium can be reversed, and the individual may return back to his/her usual self.



Types of Delirium:

There are three main types of Delirium:

1. Hypoactive: your loved one is quieter and sleeps more than usual
2. Hyperactive: your loved one turns confused, agitated and restless
3. Mixed: have both feature of hypoactive and hyperactive delirium

Risk Factors:

- 65 years old and above
- With dementia or depression
- Functionally dependent
- Impaired vision or hearing
- Dehydrated or malnourished
- Multiple medications
- Multiple medical conditions
- Been through a surgical procedure



Signs & Symptoms:

- Sudden onset of confusion
- Fluctuation between periods of drowsiness and hyper-alertness
- Difficulty paying attention and understanding what is happening
- Confused about daily events, daily routines and person
- Speech that does not make sense
- Change in mood, behavior and/or personality
- Seeing or hearing things that are not there
- Thinking that people are trying to harm them
- Become stressed, anxious or agitated
- Wandering attention
- Poor memory and speech
- Change in sleep pattern
- Change in eating habits

Medications for Delirium:

The mainstay of treatment is to treat the underlying causes of delirium. For example, the doctor may use antibiotic if infection is the cause of delirium.

If your loved ones have hyperactive delirium with aggressive disturbing behavior, the doctor may prescribe medication to calm your loved one down in order for him/her to get more rest:

1. Olanzapine: can be dissolved under tongue, and is quickly absorbed into the body.
2. Haloperidol: comes in the form of liquid drops or injections.
3. Midazolam: can be given as an injection.

What can you do to help your loved one?

Orientate

- Orientate your loved one daily to the time of day, place they are in, to stay aware of reality.
- It is reassuring for people with delirium to see familiar faces. Visit your loved ones often if possible, get help from your family or friends.



Environment

- Ensure that the environment in the room is soothing.
- Play familiar music that your loved one enjoys.
- Bring personal items which can bring comfort like a pillow, bolster, family photo or items used for aromatherapy.



Medication compliance

- Ensure your loved one takes their medication as prescribed to calm him/her 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.

Activities

- Be occupied with therapeutic activities during the day, e.g. colouring, puzzles, music therapy, reading and reminiscence therapy, i.e talking about old photos. This will preserve the natural sleep cycle. When giving instructions, state one task at a time.



See & Hear

- Ensure that your loved one uses his/her own glasses and hearing aid to minimize sensory impairment.



Sleep Hygiene

- Maintain healthy sleep-wake pattern.
Avoid caffeine after lunch.

Diet

- Drink sufficient water to stay hydrated.
- Ensure good and regular bowel and bladder clearance.



Psychological Support

- Provide reassurance to your loved one by being present with your words and touch. However, do try to avoid taxing your loved one with too many visitors.
- Avoid physical restraints: if your loved one keeps tugging on medical devices, hand mittens are a better alternative.

