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Patient information

Delirium



Whipps Cross Hospital

This leaflet provides information about delirium for patients and their relatives and carers. It explains what delirium is, who may be at risk, and how those affected can be supported in hospital.



What is delirium?

Delirium is a sudden change in somebody's brain function that can happen for a wide variety of reasons. It can last for days, weeks or months.

Am I likely to develop delirium in hospital?

Anyone can develop delirium in severe illness, but certain people (such as older adults, or people with multiple long-term health conditions) can also be at risk of delirium from milder causes. Lots of these causes of delirium may be related to hospital admission: pain, infection, surgery, dehydration, or being constipated or unable to pass urine. Sometimes a change in environment alone is enough to bring on delirium. Your hospital team will address these causes when treating your delirium.

If you develop delirium, you might:

- **Experience a sudden change** in behaviour or mental state
- Develop **problems with your memory**, especially short-term memory
- Find it **difficult to concentrate** and difficult to understand what is being said to you
- Become **restless or agitated** – or the opposite, becoming **sleepy or lethargic**
- Feel **disoriented**, not knowing where you are or what time of day it is
- **Sleep or wake** at different times from usual
- Feel **paranoid** or distrustful of others
- Experience **hallucinations**, seeing or hearing things that are not really there

What can my relatives and carers do to support me if I develop delirium while I am in hospital?

- **Visit regularly** to reduce the unfamiliarity of being in hospital
- Be with you when you receive **personal care** from nurses, such as washing or changing
- Bring in your **favourite foods** and eat with you at mealtimes
- Talk to you about **memories** or look at **photos**. This can be calming and reassuring
- Talk slowly and clearly with you about **familiar topics** which can be calming. When someone is delirious, we suggest relatives do not contradict them, as this can increase agitation
- Inform ward staff of any concerns about **pain or constipation** - often relatives are the first to notice
- Bring in any **glasses or hearing aids**

Will I get better?

Delirium often gets better quickly but can sometimes take weeks or months to get fully better. Once delirium starts to get better, your team may start thinking about how to get you home, where delirium often improves more quickly. For this reason, sometimes people are not fully recovered by the time they leave hospital. Sometimes people need additional memory assessments after an episode of delirium. Your hospital team will decide if you need this.

Where can I get more information?

As well as approaching ward staff to discuss any concerns, the following people have useful information:

- Whipps Cross Delirium and Dementia team: 0208 539 5522 (ext. 5096 or 6403)
- Carers UK: 0808 808 7777
- Age UK Advice Line: 0800 169 6565
- Royal College of Psychiatrists website: [rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/problems-disorders/delirium](https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/problems-disorders/delirium)