

Introduction to delirium

Delirium is a very rapid decline in brain function. People with delirium have decreased ability to concentrate, sleepiness, agitation, and sometimes hallucinations and/or altered beliefs. Delirium develops over hours or days. Delirium is not the same as dementia, because delirium arises quickly and is usually reversible, whereas dementia develops over months and is mostly not reversible.

Delirium is mostly caused by acute illnesses (peripheral or brain), injuries (eg. hip fracture) surgery, psychological stress (eg. change in setting), or drug side effects or withdrawal.

Delirium can affect anyone, but old age, prior cognitive impairment and having other chronic illnesses can increase the risk of delirium. Delirium is common: around 1 in 4 older people in hospital will get it.

Even a brief delirium increases the risk of poor recovery from illness, nursing home placement, and possibly dementia and death. Delirium can be stressful for patients with frightening beliefs like thinking they are in prison and in danger. Families and caregivers are distressed by delirium as well.

Delirium treatment involves multiple aspects. Delirium can be a sign that someone is extremely unwell, and the first step in care is therefore to ensure that they do not have an immediately life-threatening problem such as low blood pressure, high blood carbon dioxide or a drug overdose. Then prompt identification and treatment of all potential acute triggering illnesses or drugs must be done. Additionally, it is important to take general measures to help the brain recover (such as ensuring good hydration and a stable environment), to detect and treat distress or agitation, and to help prevent complications such as pressure sores or aspiration pneumonia. It is also essential to communicate the diagnosis to the patient and their carers.

Importantly, delirium can partly be prevented by optimisation of physiology (eg. avoiding dehydration), orientation, rapid treatment of acute illness, correcting sensory impairments, and promoting natural sleep.