

# Delirium

*Acute Confusion*



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# Delirium... *Acute Confusion*

“My family member is not usually like this.”

## What is Delirium?

Delirium is a sudden onset of mental confusion causing changes in behavior. Older persons are at greater risk. Delirium is a fairly common syndrome for patients in the hospital. Delirium is not dementia (chronic confusion) nor is it a disease. It is usually temporary and reversible.

Delirium is characterized by confusion, reduced ability to focus, disordered thinking, delusions or hallucinations. A patient with delirium may become agitated, lethargic (excessively tired) or alternate between agitation and lethargy. Delirium may last only for a few hours or it could last longer. It may be difficult to predict how long delirium might last.

### What causes delirium?

Delirium may be caused by a combination of factors; some being infection, medications, surgery with anesthetic, worsening of chronic illnesses, dehydration, malnutrition, pain, recent move or hospitalization, grief and stress over a recent loss, ill-fitting hearing aides, or glasses.

### How is delirium treated?

Treating delirium means treating the underlying cause. The cause of the delirium needs to be determined before treatment can begin. Once the cause is understood, treatment may include adjustments to the patient's environment such as reducing noise and distractions.

### What can I do to help?

Patients with delirium usually find the greatest comfort from family and friends. Your presence helps by being someone familiar who can ease fears and anxiety by:

- Promoting frequent orientation and reassurance.
- Promoting a calm and comforting environment. Avoid disagreeing with the patient as that may increase agitation.
- Promoting rest and sleep. Reduce noise and distractions. Keep light low when resting.
- Promoting a sense of well being with a gentle hand, arm or foot massage.
- Relaxing music is encouraged. Television is discouraged with the exception of stations with relaxing music.

- Promoting good vision and hearing. Encourage the use of glasses and hearing aides.
- Promoting hydration and nutrition. Encourage and assist the patient with eating. Offer fluids often.
- Promoting mental stimulation by talking about current events and family news. Read aloud. Bring a few familiar items such as family pictures and items that have meaning for the patient.

