

What is Delirium?

How do you feel afterwards?

You may not remember what has happened, particularly if you had memory problems beforehand. However, you may remember the emotions you felt at the time and this can be unpleasant and frightening.

It can be helpful to sit down with someone who can explain what happened. This might be a family member, a carer or your doctor. They can go through a diary of what happened each day.

Most people feel relieved when they understand what happened and why.

Will it happen again?

You are more likely to have delirium again if you become medically unwell. Someone needs to keep an eye out for the warning signs that you are getting unwell again – whatever the original cause was. If they are worried they should get a doctor as soon as possible. If medical problems are treated early, this can prevent delirium from happening again.

This information has been taken from the Royal College of Psychiatrists. The factsheet was produced by the RCPsych's Public Education Editorial Board. Series Editor: Dr Philip Timms.

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What delirium?

Delirium is a state of mental confusion that can happen if you become medically unwell. It is also known as an 'acute confusional state'.

Medical problems, surgery and medications can all cause delirium. It often starts suddenly and usually lifts when the condition causing it gets better. It can be frightening – not only for the person who is unwell, but also for those around them.

What is it like to have delirium?

You may:

- Be less aware of what is going on around you.
- Be unsure about where you are or what you are doing there.
- Be unable to follow a conversation or to speak clearly.
- Have vivid dreams which are often frightening and may carry on when you wake up.
- Hear noises or voices when there is nothing or no one to cause them.
- See people or things that aren't there.
- Worry that other people are trying to harm you.
- Be very agitated or restless, unable to sit still and wander around.
- Be very slow or sleepy.
- Sleep during the day, but wake up at night.
- Have moods that change quickly. You can be frightened, anxious, depressed or irritable.
- Be more confused at certain times - often in the evening or at night.

How can I help someone with delirium?

You can help someone with delirium feel calmer and more control if you:

- Stay calm.
- Talk to them in short, simple sentences. Check that they have understood you.
- Repeat things if necessary.
- Remind them of what is happening and how they are doing.
- Remind them of the time and date. Make sure they can see a clock or calendar.
- Listen to them and reassure them.
- Make sure they have their glasses and hearing aid if they require them.
- Help them to eat and drink.
- Try to make sure that someone they know well is with them. This is often most important during the evening, when confusion often gets worse.
- If they are in hospital, bring in some familiar objects from home.
- Have a light on at night so they can see where they are if they wake up.

How common is it?

About two in 10 hospital patients have a period of delirium.

Delirium is more common in people who are older, have memory problems, poor hearing or eyesight or have a terminal illness.



Why does it happen?

The most common causes of delirium are:

- A urine or chest infection.
- Having a high temperature.
- Side-effects of medicine, such as painkillers or steroids.
- Dehydration, low salt levels, low haemoglobin (anaemia).
- Liver or kidney problems.
- Suddenly stopping drugs or alcohol.
- Terminal illness.
- Constipation.
- Being in an unfamiliar place.

There is often more than one cause and sometimes the cause is not found.

How is delirium treated?

If someone suddenly becomes confused, they need to see a doctor urgently. The person with delirium may be too confused to describe what has happened to them, so it's important that the doctor can talk to someone who knows the patient well. To treat delirium, you need to treat the cause. For example, an infection may be treated with antibiotics.

Can sedative medication help?

Sedatives can make delirium worse, so should only be used in a few situations:

- To calm someone enough to have investigations or treatment.
- To stop someone endangering themselves or other people.
- When someone is very agitated or anxious.
- When someone is seeing or hearing things that aren't there.

Low doses of antipsychotic medication should be given to help with frightening hallucinations or beliefs that people are trying to harm you.

Any sedative medication should be given in the lowest possible dose for the shortest time required.

How long does it take to get better?

Delirium gets better when the cause is treated. You can recover very quickly, but it can take several days or weeks. People with dementia can take a particularly long time to get over delirium.

