

How to Help a Patient with Delirium?



Speak softly and use simple words or phrases



Remind the patient of the day and date.



Talk about family and friends.



Bring glasses, hearing aids.



Decorate the room with calendars, posters, or family pictures. These familiar items might be reminders of home.



Provide the patient with favorite music or TV shows.



If your loved one has delirium, we might ask you to sit and help calm them.

Delirium is Different From Dementia

Delirium

- Delirium comes on quickly, in hours or days. Signs of delirium can change from one day to the next.
- Delirium can make memory and thinking problems worse.
- Delirium usually clears up after a few days or even a week.

Dementia

- Usually dementia is a permanent condition.
- Dementia is a disturbance of thinking. It comes on over months or even years.
- Patients with dementia are more likely to develop delirium.

For questions, please email or visit our website.



ICUDelirium.org



CIBS@vumc.org

This is for education only. Ask your own doctor any questions you have about your health.



CRITICAL ILLNESS, BRAIN DYSFUNCTION,
and SURVIVORSHIP (CIBS) CENTER

Suite 450, 4th Floor, 2525 West End Avenue
Nashville, TN 37203

Vanderbilt University Medical Center is committed to principles of equal opportunity and affirmative action.

Copyright © 2020 by Vanderbilt University Medical Center

Patient & Family Centered Care HC-0582 04/10



Delirium in the Intensive Care Unit

A Guide for Families and Patients



ICUDelirium.org

What is Delirium?

The word “delirium” is used to describe a severe state of confusion.

People with delirium:

- Cannot think clearly
- Have trouble paying attention
- Have a hard time understanding what is going on around them
- May see or hear things that are not there. These things seem very real to them.

Delirium is common. About **2 out of 3** patients in ICUs get delirium.

7 out of 10 patients get delirium while they are on a breathing machine or soon after.

Delirium is associated with thinking and memory problems that can last for months.



People Most Likely to Get Delirium

People who:

- Have dementia
- Are advanced in age
- Have surgery, especially hip or heart
- Have depression
- Take certain high-risk medicines
- Have poor eyesight or hearing
- Have an infection or sepsis
- Have heart failure

Causes of Delirium

Experts think delirium is caused by a change in the way the brain is working.

This can be caused by:

- Less oxygen to the brain
- The brain’s inability to use oxygen
- Chemical changes in the brain
- Certain medicines
- Infections
- Severe pain
- Medical illnesses
- Alcohol, sedatives, or pain killers
- Withdrawal from alcohol, nicotine

Signs of Delirium

Your family member may:

- Appear agitated or even quiet
- Be confused
- Be aggressive
- Use inappropriate words
- Not be able to pay attention or follow directions
- Be unsure about where they are
- Be unsure about the time of day
- See things that are not there
- Act different from usual
- Have changes in sleeping habits
- Have emotional changes
- Have movements that are not normal, like tremors or picking at clothes
- Have memory problems