

## How can you help someone with delirium?

It is reassuring for people with delirium to see familiar people. Visit as often as you can and try to be available to help with their care. Encourage other family members or friends to help as well. Below are some practical tips to assist someone with delirium:

- Speak slowly in a clear voice when talking – identify both yourself and the person by name
- Encourage and assist them to have adequate food and fluids
- Knowing the time of day can reduce confusion. Remind them where they are, and what day and time it is. Open the curtains in their room to assist with their awareness of time. Where available, ensure clocks are within view.
- Visual or hearing impairment can make their confusion worse – if they usually wear glasses or hearing aids, help them to put them on
- If they are agitated or aggressive do not try to restrain them. If they want to walk around, let them, but try to make sure that they are safe from falling and that the area is free from hazards. Ask staff for assistance to support the safety of your loved one.
- Bring personal mementos that help remind them of home, such as photos, their dressing gown, radio or CD/music player with their favourite music
- Advise staff of any personal information that may help calm and orient them, such as the names of family and friends, hobbies, significant events, etc

## The symbol



The Cognitive Impairment Identifier (CII) is a small symbol placed near the patient's bedside to alert staff to memory and thinking difficulties such as dementia, delirium and cognitive impairment. Please inform staff if you would like this identifier used during your admission or on behalf of your family member or friend.

## Contacts:

### My Aged Care

Ph: 1800 200 422

[www.myagedcare.gov.au](http://www.myagedcare.gov.au)

### Dementia Australia

Ph: 1800 100 500 (National Dementia Helpline)

[www.dementia.org.au](http://www.dementia.org.au)

### Carers Australia

Ph: 1800 242 636

[www.carersaustralia.com.au](http://www.carersaustralia.com.au)

Questions and/or concerns to raise with your healthcare team:

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*The information in this brochure has been adapted from the delirium brochure, produced by the State of New South Wales Agency for Clinical Innovation, June 2018.*



## What is delirium?

Delirium is a common medical problem that is characterised by the affected person seeming confused. The onset of delirium and its symptoms are sudden. It usually only lasts for a few days but may persist for longer periods. Delirium occurs more often among older people, especially those who have dementia, however it can occur at any age.

## Who is at risk?

People who:

- are 65 years or older
- have cognitive impairment (e.g. dementia, intellectual disability or brain injury)
- are very unwell
- have had delirium before
- experience depression
- have poor eyesight and/or hearing impairment
- are taking multiple medications
- are having a surgical procedure



## What are the symptoms of delirium?

People with delirium may:

- be unable to pay attention or are easily distracted
- appear confused and forgetful
- act differently from their usual self
- have changes in their mobility and/or ability for self-care
- be very agitated, quiet and withdrawn, sleepy, or a combination of these
- be unsure of the time of day, or where they are
- experience changes to their sleeping habits, such as staying awake at night and/or being drowsy during the daytime
- see things that are not there, but seem very real to them
- feel fearful, upset, irritable, angry or sad

## How common is delirium?

About one in five older people admitted to hospital experience delirium at some stage of their care. While delirium may occur to anyone at any age, people with dementia are six times more likely to develop delirium while in hospital.

## What causes delirium?

Common causes of delirium in older people include:

- Infection
- Multiple physical illnesses
- Changes in their environment, such as being hospitalised
- Dehydration or malnutrition
- Difficulty going to the toilet (constipation or not being able to empty their bladder)
- Severe pain
- Medications, including over-the-counter medicines
- Heavy alcohol consumption
- Withdrawal from alcohol or medications

## How does delirium start?

The symptoms of delirium happen very quickly, usually over hours or days. A person's behaviour can also change frequently during the course of a single day.

Delirium is sometimes mistaken for dementia or depression, so it is important for family and friends to notify nursing or medical staff of any sudden change in a person's mental state.

## How is delirium treated?

Staff will do a thorough medical assessment to look for and treat the underlying cause of the delirium whilst reducing risks and lessening symptoms.

If a physical problem is identified, appropriate treatment will be given (e.g. antibiotics to treat an infection).

## Role of family/friends/carers

Family members, friends or carers can provide valuable information to nursing and medical staff caring for the person with delirium. It is important to notify staff of any sudden changes in a person's mental or physical condition. Please ask staff for the 'Information about me' form which can help staff in providing personalised care.

