Understanding Delirium

Delirium is a temporary state of confusion. It is often a sudden change and goes away over a few hours or days but may last longer.

It causes a person’s mind to become clouded. They may be confused, easily distracted, or do not know what is happening around them.

Some people may become uneasy, tense and anxious. Others may become slow or lethargic (no energy). Delirium is a common, serious, and often preventable problem for adult patients in the hospital.

Delirium can worsen other health conditions, and slow the healing and recovery process. It must be treated right away.

Signs of delirium can be different for everyone. They may come and go during the day. Common signs are:

- Confused or forgetful
- Restless, upset, annoyed or bothered
- More alert than usual
- Not making sense when they talk
- Worried someone is trying to harm them
- Seeing or hearing things and people that are not there
- Does not know where they are
- Mixing up days and nights
- Looks or acts different than they normally do

People at Risk for Delirium

Those at risk for delirium include older adults and people who have:

- Vision and hearing problems
- Trouble walking or getting around
- Trouble sleeping at night
- Memory problems from diseases like dementia or a stroke

Causes of Delirium Include

- An illness that gets worse
- Infection or pain
- Recent surgery
- Changes in medicines
- Alcohol and drug use
- Withdrawal from alcohol or drugs
- Dehydration, hunger, thirst, or cold
- Changes in blood sugar levels
- High or low levels of sodium, potassium, calcium or magnesium in the blood
- Lack of sleep
- Vision or hearing problems
- Changes in daily routines and surroundings
- Constipation
- Not able to urinate (pee)
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Treatment and Helping Those with Delirium

Treatment for delirium is important. Delirium can be a sign of other problems like an illness or injury. Delirium often improves over time when the problem that is causing it is treated.

To help your loved one who has delirium during their stay in the hospital:

- Talk to their doctors if you see a change in their usual behavior.
- Have a family member, caregiver, or friend stay with them in their hospital room as much as possible.
- Give reminders about what day it is, the time, and where they are.
- Try to keep a regular daily plan of wake up and bedtime. Keep the lights on during the day and the TV off at night.
- Allow them to get a good and long night time sleep.
- Be sure to bring in eyeglasses, hearing aids, and dentures.
- Bring in familiar objects, pictures of family members, or a favorite item.
- Help keep a quiet and peaceful setting. Quiet, soothing music may be helpful. Cut down the noise, stay calm.
- Make sure they are eating and drinking as much as they need.
- Ask the nurse for help getting them out of their hospital bed, walking and going to the toilet.
- Motivate them to work with physical and occupational therapy to gain strength.