Delirium (Acute Confusion)

What is delirium?
Delirium is confusion that comes on suddenly. It is often caused by medical problems or medications. It can occur in 10 to 15% of people over the age of 65 who are in the hospital. Identifying and treating delirium symptoms early can lower the risk for complications and death.

What does delirium look like?
Delirium can have several symptoms that begin suddenly and may change throughout the day. Symptoms may include:
• Being unable to focus attention
• Rambling thoughts that don’t make sense
• Being overly aware of things around them
• Being less aware and less responsive
• Not knowing where they are
• Being confused about dates and times
• Being more forgetful than usual
• Having trouble concentrating
• Having trouble following directions
• Increasingly restless or agitated
• More sluggish or drowsy than usual
• Problems with understanding
• Seeing or hearing imaginary things
• Increasingly mistrustful
• Mixing up their days and nights

Being forgetful may be “normal” for some people. But if you see a change in a person’s ability to pay attention or to think and speak normally, they may need to be checked for delirium.

What puts my family member at risk?
A person is at risk for delirium if he or she:
• Has had delirium before
• Has memory or thinking problems
• Has a severe illness
• Is dehydrated
• Has problems with seeing or hearing
• Takes 5 or more medications

These things can cause a person to get delirium:
• An infection
• Medication side effects
• Not taking medications as prescribed
• Recent surgery with anesthetic
• Worsening of a chronic illness, such as heart or breathing problems
• Dehydration
• Poor nutrition
• High or low blood sugar
• Constipation or diarrhea
• Pain
• Alcohol intoxication or withdrawal
• A recent injury
• Grief or stress over a recent loss
• Uncorrected hearing or vision problems

How is delirium treated?
The cause(s) of the delirium must be figured out before treatment begins. This usually means doing some tests and asking questions. Treatment may include medication to control symptoms. People with delirium need to be watched closely until the confusion has cleared.

What can I do to help?
If your loved one is at risk for delirium, help the hospital staff to provide a calm, familiar environment. Bring in photos and familiar items. Tell staff about home “routines” that are important to the patient.

Delirium symptoms may come on suddenly. Watch for unusual changes in how your family member is talking or acting. Listen for clues about things that may be troubling or causing your loved one to become agitated. Report these changes to help us know when delirium occurs.

On the next page are specific suggestions for ways you can help a family member who has delirium.
What can I do to help? (continued)

Promote orientation and thinking
• Help the person to keep track of time by putting calendars and clocks in plain sight
• Listen to what the person is saying
• Talk about current events and surroundings
• Keep them involved in making choices
• Avoid getting into arguments
• Arrange for familiar people to visit
• Discourage social isolation
• Encourage reading and thinking tasks
(continue confusion has cleared)

Promote healthy eating and drinking
• Ask the hospital staff for more information about the person’s food and fluid needs
• Encourage and help with eating
• Offer fluids often
• Offer foods that the person likes

Promote healthy rest and sleep
• Reduce noise and distractions
• Keep lights low or off when resting
• Increase comfort with a pillow, blanket, warm drink or back rub
• Do not use sleeping pills if possible

Promote physical activity
• Help person to do as much of their hygiene, bathing and dressing as possible
• Encourage sitting up and walking if able
• Talk with your health care provider about exercise and safe activities after discharge

Promote healthy hearing and vision
• Encourage the wearing of glasses and hearing aids
• Keep glasses clean
• Make sure hearing aids are working
• Use enough light
• Help the person to get large print reading materials or a magnifying glass if needed

Promote recovery during hospital stay
• Work with the hospital staff to help the person with pain control
• If breathing problems are present, encourage breathing treatments as instructed
• Help person to return to usual bowel and bladder routines
• Learn how to watch for signs of infection and when to call the doctor

Will my family member return to normal?
Delirium often clears in a few days or weeks in many people. Some problems with thinking and memory may not go away for several weeks or may not improve at all.

Each person is different. Talk with your health care provider about your family member or loved one.

What should we do after hospital discharge?
Persons who have had delirium while in the hospital are encouraged to follow up and have regular visits with a primary care provider. Your loved one may need further testing to check for any health problems that can lead to symptoms of delirium.
If the delirium symptoms return, contact your doctor for medical help.

Learn as much as you can about the causes and treatment of delirium. This can help prevent further problems and improve the outcome for your loved one.