

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 but seem very real to them

It 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

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





PLEASE VISIT
www.ICUdelirium.org

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
Vanderbilt University

DELIRIUM

In the
Intensive Care
Unit

A GUIDE FOR FAMILIES AND PATIENTS

SIGNS OF DELIRIUM

Who would get it?

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 infection or sepsis
- Have heart failure

Signs

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 things
- have memory problems

IT IS NOT 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

Does delirium cause thinking problems after a patient leaves the hospital?

Research shows that patients who develop delirium might have dementia-like thinking problems that can last for months

At this time we cannot predict who might develop dementia-like thinking problems

YOU CAN HELP

How can you help?

- 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, etc
- Decorate the room with calendars, posters, or family pictures
- 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