

# Delirium:

## A guide for patients, family members, and caregivers

### What is Delirium?

Delirium is a temporary state of confusion. It causes a person's mind to become clouded and makes paying attention and focusing thoughts difficult. It develops quickly over hours or days. It usually only lasts for a few hours or a few days, but may last longer. Delirium is a common, serious, and often preventable problem in hospitalized older adults. Delirium can slow the healing and recovery process and requires immediate treatment.

### Who is at risk for Delirium?

People who:

- Are 65 or older
- Are dehydrated/malnourished
- Have dementia or depression
- Take multiple medications
- Are not functionally independent
- Have multiple medical conditions
- Have impaired vision or hearing
- Are having surgery

### What are the symptoms of Delirium?

Symptoms of delirium are different for different people. Symptoms may come and go throughout the day. People with delirium may have some of the following symptoms:

- Difficulty understanding what is happening around them
- Thinking that people are trying to harm them
- Confusion about daily events, daily routines, and who people are
- Becoming quiet and withdrawn
- Saying things that do not make sense
- Becoming stressed, anxious, or hyper
- Changes in personality
- Changes in sleeping habits
- Seeing or hearing things that are not really there
- Changes in eating habits

## How can I help care for a loved one who is delirious?

- Have a family member, caregiver, or friend stay with the delirious patient as much as possible. This is especially important when their confusion is severe. This will help reduce some of the anxiety caused by being in an unfamiliar place.
- Help maintain a quiet and peaceful setting.
- Bring in familiar objects from home.
- Make sure the lighting is good but not too bright.
- Play soothing music.
- If your loved one wears glasses, make sure they are clean and fit well. If your loved one wears hearing aids, make sure the batteries are fully charged.
- Keep your loved one mobile as much as possible. Talk to the nurse or doctor about appropriate options.
- Make sure your loved one is eating and drinking enough.
- Talk to your loved one about the delirious episode. This can help lessen the anxiety, fear, frustration, or anger that might otherwise develop.

## Important things to remember:

- Delirium is common and usually temporary.
- Family members and caregivers can play an important role in caring for a person with delirium.
- Tell a health care provider immediately if you notice any sudden changes in behavior or other symptoms of delirium.
- Delirium can be a scary experience. If you or your loved one experiences delirium, talking to a health care provider can help you understand what happened.
- Talk to your health care provider if you have any questions or concerns about delirium.

Adapted from Aging Brain Center Institute for Aging Research, Hebrew SeniorLife

[www.hospitalelderlifeprogram.org](http://www.hospitalelderlifeprogram.org)