

Recognizing Delirium: A Checklist for Caregivers



Delirium is a sudden change in a person's mental state that comes and goes over short periods of time. It can cause a person to have a hard time paying attention or following a conversation. Thinking and speech may be confused, illogical, unclear, and unpredictable. A person's mental state may vary from being restless and alert to sluggish and sleepy.

Delirium can sometimes be mistaken for dementia. Often the 2 conditions occur together. But delirium happens quickly over a short time, such as hours or days. Dementia happens more slowly, over months or years.

Delirium is a medical emergency. If delirium isn't diagnosed and treated, it can lead to lasting (permanent) problems or even death.

A checklist of delirium signs

Below is a checklist of the signs of delirium. It's important to remember that the signs of delirium happen quickly, over the course of hours or days. They can come and go, and may be worse later in the day. And a person may shift between the signs.

Does the person:

- ☐ Seem acutely more sleepy and quiet than normal, or more restless and disturbed?
- ☐ Seem suddenly confused or disoriented?
- ☐ Act in a violent way?
- ☐ Have trouble paying attention and focusing on a conversation?
- ☐ See things that others can't see?
- ☐ Hear things that others can't hear?
- ☐ Believe things that aren't known to be true?
- ☐ Think that people want to harm them?
- ☐ Change the subject too often while talking?
- ☐ Talk about things that others find strange?
- ☐ Have anxiety, seem sad or tearful, or have intense feelings of joy and excitement (euphoria) that change rapidly?
- ☐ Seem unsteady while walking, but not due to a past health condition?
- ☐ Have a hard time focusing on simple tasks?

If you've answered yes to any of the signs above, your loved one may have delirium. If you think they have any of the signs above, you can do 2 simple tests to check their mental state. One tests their attention. The other tests how clearly they're thinking.

Attention test

Try this test:

- Say to the person, "I'm going to read you a series of 10 letters. Each time you hear the letter A, squeeze my hand."
- Read each of these letters, 3 seconds apart: S A V E A H A A R T.

- Count each time the person does **not** squeeze your hand when you say the letter A.
- Count each time they squeeze your hand on a letter other than A.
- If the person has 3 or more errors, they may have delirium.

Thinking test

Ask the person these 4 questions:

1. Will a stone float on water? (Correct answer: **No**)
2. Are there fish in the sea? (Correct answer: **Yes**)
3. Does 1 pound weigh more than 2? (Correct answer: **No**)
4. Can you use a hammer to pound a nail? (Correct answer: **Yes**)

Count each time they give a wrong answer. If they have 2 or more errors, and they could previously answer these questions, they may have delirium.

When to get medical help

Delirium is a medical emergency. If someone is showing signs of delirium, call their healthcare provider right away. Or call 911. Tell the healthcare provider or emergency services person about the signs of delirium you've seen.

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