

# **Understanding Acute Delirium**



**Information for  
Families, Friends  
and Caregivers**



**Sunnybrook**

HEALTH SCIENCES CENTRE



## Understanding acute delirium

Delirium is confusion that happens suddenly. It is a common problem for older people in the hospital. Delirium can affect a person's thinking and behaviour and significantly affect his/her ability to perform their activities of daily living.

## Causes of delirium may include:

- Traumatic injury
- Surgery
- New illness or infection
- Medication
- Staying in bed for too long
- Poor nutrition
- Pain
- Sleep disturbances

The presence of delirium can delay discharge from hospital. Staff will be assessing your family member for the onset of delirium on a daily basis.

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## Common features of delirium:

- Being restless and unable to stay still
- Forgetfulness and having trouble concentrating
- Seeing and hearing things that are not real
- Mixing up day and night
- Sometimes be confused and then suddenly seem normal
- Not knowing where they are and trying to climb out of bed
- Be drowsier and sleepier than usual
- Telling stories about events that don't make sense or did not happen
- Slurring of speech
- Irritability and suspiciousness
- Lasts hours or weeks, rarely over a month

## How to help your family member who is experiencing delirium

- Talk to the health care team about any concerns identified by your family member (seeing things, feeling confused)
- Please bring in glasses or hearing aids. These help to orient your family member to their environment
- Calm and reassuring visits from family and friends are important to help the person feel safe in their current environment
- Bring in familiar objects, clothing and pictures to increase comfort
- Minimize distractions when communicating with your loved one (turn down TV, eye to eye conversation, speak clearly)
- Ensure adequate periods of rest
- Encourage good nutritional intake
- Encourage your family member to get out of bed and move around as much as possible



## What staff may do to care for your family member

- We may move your family member closer to the nursing station so that we may better observe and respond to him/her. This may involve placing him/her in a ward room
- If your family member is extremely agitated or frequently attempting to climb out of bed, we may hire an observer to sit with him/her to ensure safety and provide reassurance. This observer may be shared between one or two other patients
- We may do routine tests to determine the cause of delirium
- We may involve consult services, for example geriatrics, to assist in the care of your family member



**Inter-Professional Prevention of Delirium  
in the Emergency Department  
(IPPOD)**

# ***“Working together to prevent delirium”***

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For more information and additional resources, please talk with the nurse, occupational therapist or social worker working with your family member.

Please don't hesitate to express your concerns with the staff as it is important to work together to help your family member through this difficult time.

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