

## Ten tips for reducing the risk of delirium in the hospital

1. Bring a complete list of all medications to the hospital. It may help to bring the medication bottles.
2. Prepare a “medical information sheet” that lists all allergies, names and phone numbers of physicians, the name of the patient’s usual pharmacy, and all known medical conditions.
3. Bring glasses, hearing aids, and dentures to the hospital.
4. Bring in familiar objects from home.
5. Help orient the patient throughout the day. Speak in a calm and reassuring tone of voice. Tell the patient where he is and why he is there.
6. When giving instructions, state one simple task at a time.
7. Massage can be soothing for some patients.
8. Stay with your loved one in the hospital as much as possible.
9. Tell the nurse or doctor immediately if you notice any symptoms of delirium. Family members are often the first to notice subtle changes.
10. Learn more about delirium.

## 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.

# Delirium

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



Aging Brain Center  
Institute for Aging Research  
Hebrew SeniorLife

1200 Centre Street  
Boston, MA 02131  
(617) 971-5390  
AgingBrainCenter@hsl.harvard.edu  
www.hospitalelderlifeprogram.org

 Institute for  
Aging Research  
Hebrew SeniorLife



## 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
- Have dementia or depression
- Are not functionally independent
- Have impaired vision or hearing
- Are dehydrated/malnourished
- Take multiple medications
- Have multiple medical conditions
- 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
- Confusion about daily events, daily routines, and who people are
- Saying things that do not make sense
- Changes in personality
- Seeing or hearing things that are not really there
- Thinking that people are trying to harm them
- Becoming quiet and withdrawn
- Becoming stressed, anxious, or hyper
- Changes in sleeping habits
- 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.
- If your loved one is in physical restraints, ask if they can be removed.
- 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.