Delirium within Intensive Care

What is delirium?

Delirium is a state of mental confusion that can occur if you be-come unwell. It is sometimes known as ‘acute confusional state’.

Medical problems, surgery and medications can all be identified as causes of delirium. Delirium often starts suddenly and usually lifts when the condition causing it improves. It can be frightening – not only for the person who is unwell, but also for those around them.

How common is it?

- About two in 10 hospital patients have a period of delirium
- Delirium is more common in people who:
  – are older
  – have memory problems
  – have poor hearing or eyesight
  – have recently had surgery
  – have a terminal illness
  – have an illness of the brain, such as an infection
  – have suffered a stroke or a head injury

Why does it happen?

The most common causes of delirium are:

- A urine or chest infection
- Being in an unfamiliar place
- Side effects of medicine like pain killers and steroids
- Dehydration, low salt levels, low haemoglobin (anaemia)
- Constipation
- Suddenly stopping drugs or alcohol
- Major surgery
- Epilepsy
- Brain injury or infection
- Terminal illness
- Liver or kidney problems
- Having a high temperature

There is often more than one cause – and sometimes the cause is not found.

How can I help someone with delirium?

You can help someone with delirium feel calmer and more in control if you:

- Stay calm
- Talk to them in short, simple sentences. Check that they have understood you and repeat things if necessary
- Remind them of what is happening and how they are doing
- Remind them of the time and date, and make sure they can see a clock or a calendar
- Listen to them and reassure them
- Make sure they have their glasses and hearing aid, if required
- Help them to eat and drink
- Try to make sure that someone they know well is with them. This is often most important during the evening, when confusion often gets more severe
- If they are in hospital, bring in some familiar objects from home that they will recognise
- Have a light on at night so that they can see where they are if they wake up

What is it like to have delirium?

You may:

- Be less aware of what is going on around you
- Be unsure about where you are or what you are doing there
- Be unable to follow a conversation or speak clearly
- Have vivid dreams, which are often frightening and may carry on after you wake up
- Hear noises or voices when there is nothing or no one to cause them
- See people or things which aren't there
- Worry that other people are trying to harm you
- Be very agitated or restless, unable to sit still
- Be very slow or sleepy
- Sleep during the day, but wake up at night
- Have moods that change quickly
- Be frightened, anxious, depressed or irritable
- Be more confused at some times more than others, often in the evening or at night

How long does it take to get better?

Delirium gets better when the cause is treated.
You can recover very quickly, but it can take several days or weeks. People with dementia can take a particularly long time to get over delirium.

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