

## **DELIRIUM**

### **PATIENT/FAMILY INFORMATION SHEET**

#### **What is delirium?**

Delirium (duh-lee-ree-um) is a condition of severe confusion and rapid changes in brain function. It is usually caused by a physical or mental illness which is treatable. Delirium is a **symptom** of illness or imbalance in body systems, not a disease.

#### **What causes delirium?**

There are many causes of delirium. Some of the very common causes of delirium include:

- Infections
- Conditions which limit oxygen to the brain (such as heart attacks or strokes)
- Alcohol or drug intoxication
- Changes in body fluid levels (such as dehydration)
- Abnormal blood glucose (sugar) levels
- Reactions to medications (such as sleeping pills or pain medicines)
- Recent surgery
- Severe pain
- High fevers

#### **What are the signs of delirium?**

Delirium usually involves a changing mental state. People with delirium may be very sleepy or lethargic at some times and extremely restless and agitated at other times of the day. They may thrash around in bed or not seem to know where they are, or not be able to recognize family. They may say strange things, or resist medical care. Families may find these changes very frightening. Other signs of delirium may include:

- Being unable to think clearly
- Inability to pay attention
- Being disoriented to time or place
- Decreased short term memory
- Hallucinations
- Emotional or personality changes ( such as anxiousness, irritability or depression)
- Changes in sleep/wake patterns

## **Who may be affected?**

Delirium is very common in hospital patients. 10-20% of patients in the hospital may develop delirium, and up to 40% of elderly patients may become delirious in the hospital.

Any person who has an acute illness may suffer from delirium at some time. Drugs and alcohol are frequent causes of delirium. Elderly people have a higher risk. People who already have lowered brain function because of dementia or other causes are much more subject to delirium.

## **How is delirium diagnosed?**

The doctor includes an assessment of mental state in the overall examination of the patient. If a person is unable to answer ordinary questions, or seems lethargic, confused or restless the doctor may suspect delirium. Nurses caring for patients throughout the day and night are also alert for signs of confusion or disorientation. Families are a very important source of information, as they know what the person is usually like, and may notice slight changes early on.

## **Why is it important to watch out for delirium?**

Patients who are delirious are unable to participate in their own care. They may pull out IV lines or remove necessary oxygen tubes or other treatments. They are at very high risk of falling.

## **How is delirium treated?**

Finding and treating the underlying cause of delirium is most important. The doctor may do blood tests, x-rays or other tests find the most likely cause of the problem. The medical team will also look at the medications and treatments the patient is receiving, to see if a reaction to a drug or procedure might be contributing to the problem. Assessment and management of pain or other discomfort is an important part of the treatment. Quite often, delirium has multiple causes, and all must be attended to in order to resolve the problem.

## **What can I do to help?**

You can be extremely helpful in letting the caregivers know about your loved one's usual mental status and level of function, and reporting any changes promptly. Having a family member stay with the patient when possible helps to maintain safety.

Reference: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. 4th Ed. American Psychiatric Association. Washington D.C. 2000;136-147.

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