

# WHAT IS DELIRIUM

The word “delirium” is used to describe a severe state of confusion.

People with delirium:

- Cannot think clearly
- Have trouble paying attention
- Have a hard time understanding what is going on around them
- May see or hear things that are not there but seem very real to them

It is common

- About 2 out of 3 patients in ICUs get delirium
- 7 out of 10 patients get delirium while they are on a breathing machine or soon after

Experts think delirium is caused by a change in the way the brain is working.

This can be caused by:

- Less oxygen to the brain
- The brain’s inability to use oxygen
- Chemical changes in the brain
- Certain medicines
- Infections
- Severe pain
- Medical illnesses
- Alcohol, sedatives, or pain killers
- Withdrawal from alcohol, nicotine

niagarahealth  
Extraordinary Caring. Every Person. Every Time.

A Healthier Niagara



niagarahealth

PAD Program Pain, Agitation and Delirium



**PLEASE VISIT**  
[www.ICUdelirium.org](http://www.ICUdelirium.org)

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**  
Vanderbilt University

In the  
Intensive Care  
Unit

# DELIRIUM

# SIGNS OF DELIRIUM

Who would get it?

People who:

- Have dementia
- Are advanced in age
- Have surgery, especially hip or heart
- Have depression
- Take certain high-risk medicines
- Have poor eyesight or hearing
- Have infection or sepsis
- Have heart failure

Signs

Your family member may:

- Appear agitated or even quiet
- Be confused
- Be aggressive
- Use inappropriate words
- Not be able to pay attention or follow directions
- Be unsure about where they are
- Be unsure about the time of day
- See things that are not there
- Act different from usual
- Have changes in sleeping habits
- Have emotional changes
- Have movements that are not normal, like tremors or picking at things
- have memory problems

# IT IS NOT DEMENTIA

Delirium:

Delirium comes on quickly, in hours or days

Signs of delirium can change from one day to the next

Delirium can make memory and thinking problems worse

Delirium usually clears up after a few days or even a week

Dementia:

Usually dementia is a permanent condition

Dementia is a disturbance of thinking

It comes on over months or even years

Patients with dementia are more likely to develop delirium

Does delirium cause thinking problems after a patient leaves the hospital?

Research shows that patients who develop delirium might have dementia-like thinking problems that can last for months

At this time we cannot predict who might develop dementia-like thinking problems

# YOU CAN HELP

How can you help?

Speak softly and use simple words or phrases

Remind the patient of the day and date

Talk about family and friends

Bring glasses, hearing aids, etc

Decorate the room with calendars, posters, or family pictures

Provide the patient with favorite music or TV shows

If your loved one has delirium, we might ask you to sit and help calm them