Delirium

We have written this pamphlet to help you and your family learn more about delirium.

What is delirium?
Delirium is a medical condition that causes a temporary problem with mental function.

• It often begins quite suddenly.
• The symptoms tend to come and go, and often increase at night.
• People may have problems with attention (poor eye contact, being confused).
• Some people with delirium are very sleepy or even drowsy.
• Some people with delirium are very agitated and can pick at or see things that are not there.
• Some people with delirium show both drowsiness and agitation over a day or two.
• There is often an underlying illness.

Is delirium the same as dementia?
Delirium is not the same as dementia (memory failure such as Alzheimer’s disease). People with dementia have a greater risk of developing delirium if they become physically ill. Dementia happens slowly over time not suddenly like delirium.

Want More Information?
• Geriatric Medicine Centre for Health Care of the Elderly 473-8603
• Delirium website: www.thisisnotmymom.ca/

Treatment and Recovery
Doctors and nurses will try to find the underlying cause(s) of the condition by doing a careful assessment, including a number of tests. Once the cause(s) is identified, the best treatment can be started. Sometimes a cause is not found despite reasonable investigation. The person will often be less confused and disorientated when in their own home during the recovery stages.

Recovery may take days to months.

• Encourage adequate fluid and nutritional intake.
• Decrease caffeine intake.
• Keep comfortable and minimize pain. Let staff know if you notice otherwise.
• Increase activity and encourage to be up and about when safe to do so.
• Tell the nurses if the person is very restless or you note any change in behaviour.
• Ensure that hearing aids and glasses are in place.
• Provide regular toileting to help bowel and bladder function.
• Place a calendar/clock within view.

• Encourage adequate fluid and nutritional intake.
• Decrease caffeine intake.
• Keep comfortable and minimize pain. Let staff know if you notice otherwise.
• Increase activity and encourage to be up and about when safe to do so.
• Tell the nurses if the person is very restless or you note any change in behaviour.
• Ensure that hearing aids and glasses are in place.
• Provide regular toileting to help bowel and bladder function.
• Place a calendar/clock within view.
Is delirium the same as mental illness?
Delirium is not the same as mental illness (such as schizophrenia), although some of the symptoms may be the same.

What are the symptoms?
- Confused or muddled thinking and actions.
- Emotional upset, anxiety is common.
- Misunderstanding what is seen or heard and/or be suspicious of others.
- Seeing or hearing things that aren’t there.
- Increased restlessness and irritability or may seem quieter than usual.
- Unaware of correct time and place.
- Reduced ability to concentrate and focus attention.

A person with delirium may or may not have all of these behaviours. The symptoms often increase at night.

What causes delirium?
- Infections, such as a bladder or lung infection.
- Worsening chronic health problems such as heart failure, obstructive lung disease.
- Severe illness such as dehydration or out of control diabetes.
- Taking many medications or the toxic effects of certain medications.
- Suddenly stopping certain drugs or alcohol.
- After surgery, especially if a general anesthesia was given.

What can make delirium worse while in the hospital?
- Using physical restraints/limiting mobility/long periods of bedrest
- Dehydration
- Poor nutrition
- Pain
- Impaired eyesight or hearing
- Constipation
- Cannot pass urine
- Catheter in the bladder
- No sleep time
- Moving to an unfamiliar environment

What can family members do to help?
- Be calm and reassuring.
- Talk slowly and clearly. Use simple sentences about familiar, non threatening topics.
- Speak supportively.
- Don’t argue or try to convince the person that he/she is wrong.
- Don’t quiz, test or challenge the person.
- Don’t argue or try to convince the person that he/she is wrong.
- Take care not to over stimulate the person.
- Reduce fatigue with uninterrupted rest periods.
- Bring in familiar items from home.
- Provide soothing music.
Is delirium the same as mental illness?
Delirium is not the same as mental illness (such as schizophrenia), although some of the symptoms may be the same.

What are the symptoms?
- Confused or muddled thinking and actions.
- Emotional upset, anxiety is common.
- Misunderstanding what is seen or heard and/or be suspicious of others.
- Seeing or hearing things that aren’t there.
- Increased restlessness and irritability or may seem quieter than usual.
- Unaware of correct time and place.
- Reduced ability to concentrate and focus attention.

A person with delirium may or may not have all of these behaviours. The symptoms often increase at night.

What causes delirium?
- Infections, such as a bladder or lung infection.
- Worsening chronic health problems such as heart failure, obstructive lung disease.
- Severe illness such as dehydration or out of control diabetes.
- Taking many medications or the toxic effects of certain medications.
- Suddenly stopping certain drugs or alcohol.
- After surgery, especially if a general anesthesia was given.

What can make delirium worse while in the hospital?
- Using physical restraints/limiting mobility/long periods of bedrest
- Dehydration
- Poor nutrition
- Pain
- Impaired eyesight or hearing
- Constipation
- Cannot pass urine
- Catheter in the bladder
- No sleep time
- Moving to an unfamiliar environment

What can family members do to help?
- Be calm and reassuring.
- Talk slowly and clearly. Use simple sentences about familiar, non threatening topics.
- Speak supportively.
- Don’t argue or try to convince the person that he/she is wrong.
- Don’t quiz, test or challenge the person.
- Take care not to over stimulate the person.
- Reduce fatigue with uninterrupted rest periods.
- Bring in familiar items from home.
- Provide soothing music.

What are the symptoms?
- Confused or muddled thinking and actions.
- Emotional upset, anxiety is common.
- Misunderstanding what is seen or heard and/or be suspicious of others.
- Seeing or hearing things that aren’t there.
- Increased restlessness and irritability or may seem quieter than usual.
- Unaware of correct time and place.
- Reduced ability to concentrate and focus attention.

A person with delirium may or may not have all of these behaviours. The symptoms often increase at night.

What causes delirium?
- Infections, such as a bladder or lung infection.
- Worsening chronic health problems such as heart failure, obstructive lung disease.
- Severe illness such as dehydration or out of control diabetes.
- Taking many medications or the toxic effects of certain medications.
- Suddenly stopping certain drugs or alcohol.
- After surgery, especially if a general anesthesia was given.
Delirium

We have written this pamphlet to help you and your family learn more about delirium.

What is delirium?
Delirium is a medical condition that causes a temporary problem with mental function.

- It often begins quite suddenly.
- The symptoms tend to come and go, and often increase at night.
- People may have problems with attention (poor eye contact, being confused).
- Some people with delirium are very sleepy or even drowsy.
- Some people with delirium are very agitated and can pick at or see things that are not there.
- Some people with delirium show both drowsiness and agitation over a day or two.
- There is often an underlying illness.

Is delirium the same as dementia?
Delirium is not the same as dementia (memory failure such as Alzheimer’s disease). People with dementia have a greater risk of developing delirium if they become physically ill. Dementia happens slowly over time not suddenly like delirium.