

What is delirium? A one-page guide

Delirium is a sudden change in how a person thinks and responds. They may become confused, very sleepy, agitated or anxious. The person is different from their normal self, and the change appears over hours or days.

Common signs

- Sudden confusion about where they are, the time or what is happening
- Trouble paying attention or following a conversation
- Unusual drowsiness, withdrawal or slow responses
- Restlessness, agitation, fear or anger
- Seeing or hearing things that are not there, or strong new suspicions
- Symptoms that come and go, often worse in the evening or at night

The quiet, sleepy form is common and particularly easy to miss.

What causes it?

Illness, injury, surgery or a change in medicines can disrupt how the brain works. Common triggers include infection, pain, dehydration and constipation. Often, several triggers are acting together.

How is it treated?

Treatment means looking for and treating the underlying cause or causes. Practical care matters too: safe help with food and drink, sleep, movement, glasses, hearing aids and calm reassurance. No drug has been shown to treat delirium itself. Many people improve, but recovery may be gradual.

Delirium is not the same as dementia

Dementia usually develops over months or years. Delirium arrives over hours or days and often fluctuates. Someone who has dementia can also develop delirium. A sudden worsening needs medical assessment.

WORDS TO USE

"They are not their normal self. This started on [day or time]. I think this could be delirium. Could they be assessed now?"

Get medical help now

At home: contact the urgent or emergency medical service where the person is. In England, call 999 or go to A&E. In Scotland, contact the GP urgently if open; otherwise phone NHS 24 on 111.

In hospital or a care home: tell a nurse or senior carer immediately and describe the change from normal.

Call the local emergency number immediately (999 in the UK) if the person is hard to wake, struggling to breathe, has signs of a stroke, has a seizure or head injury, or is getting worse rapidly.

New sudden confusion needs medical assessment now. Do not wait to see if it settles.