Delirium action guide

What to look for, what to say and what to do now

Delirium is a sudden change in a person's thinking, memory or alertness. It comes on over hours or days. A doctor or nurse needs to check the person as an emergency.

What to look for

- Confused about time or place, or clearly more confused than normal
- Much sleepier than usual, drifting off or responding less
- Restless, frightened, angry or visibly upset
- Newly suspicious of family, carers or staff
- Seeing or hearing things that are not there
- Awake at night and asleep by day

Symptoms may come and go. Nights are often worse. The person may still have delirium even if they seem better for an hour. The quiet, sleepy form is common and often missed.

Delirium or dementia?

Ask: is this person different from their normal self, and did the change come on within hours or days? Dementia usually develops over months or years. Any sudden worsening could be delirium or another urgent medical problem and needs assessment now.

Words to use

> **"She is normally independent, with a good memory. Since yesterday she has been confused and very sleepy. She is not herself. I think this could be delirium. She needs emergency medical assessment now."**

What to do

- At home or elsewhere outside a care setting: phone the local emergency number now.
- In a hospital or other care setting: tell a nurse or senior staff member immediately, describe the change from normal and ask for a delirium assessment.

If you can, have this information ready:

- What the person was like a week ago
- What changed and when
- Current medicines and recent changes
- Recent illness, pain, falls, drinking less than usual or difficulty passing stools
- Whether this has happened before

Get emergency help now

Phone the local emergency number now for delirium (acute confusion) outside a care setting. In a hospital or care home, tell staff immediately. Tell them if the person is hard to wake, barely responds, struggles to breathe, has signs of a stroke, has had a seizure or head injury, or is getting worse quickly. Mention any blood-thinning medicines after a head injury.

If there is an agreed palliative care plan for treating symptoms and keeping the person comfortable, contact that team urgently and follow the plan.

Read more: https://deliriumsupport.com/get-help-now/

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