

Delirium or dementia?

The differences at a glance

A change that starts over hours or days could be delirium, even if the person already has dementia. A hallucination means seeing or hearing something that is not there.

	Delirium	Dementia
How it starts	Over hours or days. You can often put a date on it.	Usually over months or years. Often noticed when looking back.
How it changes	May come and go during the day. Often worse at night.	Usually slower and steadier. Symptoms can get better and worse in dementia with Lewy bodies. Dementia caused by damage to blood vessels in the brain may change in steps.
Attention	Often poor. The person may find it hard to follow a conversation.	Often less affected in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. This varies in other types of dementia.
Alertness	May be unusually sleepy, respond less than usual or be unusually alert.	Usually normal in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. This varies in other types of dementia.
Seeing or hearing things that are not there	This may happen. Seeing things can be frightening.	This can happen, especially in dementia with Lewy bodies.
Cause	A new physical problem, such as illness, injury, surgery or a medicine change.	Diseases of the brain, most often Alzheimer's disease.
What happens next	Often improves when the causes are treated, though recovery can be slow.	Usually changes slowly over time. Treatment and support depend on the type and cause.

When the person already has dementia

People with dementia are more likely to develop delirium. If the person suddenly gets worse, it could be delirium or another new medical problem. Treat it as such until a doctor or nurse has checked the person.

"She has dementia, but this is different. On Tuesday she was feeding herself and chatting. Today she can't stay awake. Could she be assessed for delirium?"

Get medical help now

Delirium (acute confusion) is a medical emergency. If it begins at home or elsewhere outside a care setting, phone the local emergency number now. In a hospital or other care setting, tell staff immediately and describe the change from normal.

Read more: <https://deliriumsupport.com/delirium-or-dementia/>

