



A unique health and social care partnership made up of the NHS, councils, Healthwatch, voluntary and community organisations, serving 2.6 million people.

Covering Bradford including Airedale, Wharfedale and Craven; Calderdale; Harrogate; Kirklees; Leeds and Wakefield.

✉ [westyorkshire.stp@nhs.net](mailto:westyorkshire.stp@nhs.net)

☎ 01924 317659

🌐 [www.wyhpartnership.co.uk](http://www.wyhpartnership.co.uk)

🐦 @WYHpartnership

This leaflet has been produced to give you general information about delirium. If you have any other questions please do not hesitate to discuss this with a member of the healthcare team who has been caring for your friend or relative.

**For more information about delirium:**

**National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) information for people with delirium, carers and those at risk of delirium.**

[www.nice.org.uk/guidance/CG103/InformationForPublic](http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/CG103/InformationForPublic)

**Royal College of Psychiatrists information leaflet:**

[www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/problemsdisorders/delirium.aspx](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/problemsdisorders/delirium.aspx)

*Original Authors: Dr A Clegg (Consultant Geriatrician), Dr A Illsley (Geriatric medicine registrar)*

*Adapted by: Yorkshire and the Humber Clinical Network Delirium Steering Group.*



**Prevent it, Suspect it, Stop it.**

**Information for families, friends and carers**

## What is delirium?

Delirium is a condition where people have increased confusion, changes in thinking and a reduced attention span. Symptoms can develop quickly and often change during the day.

Delirium is also known as 'acute confusion'. It is treatable - but if it isn't picked up and treated, it can be life-threatening.

## Who is at risk of delirium?

Anyone can develop delirium, but the following increase your risk: older age; dementia; hearing and/or sight loss; being in hospital with a broken hip or serious illness; having a lot of health problems.

## How can I tell if it's delirium?

People are affected by delirium in different ways but the person may:

- Become restless
- Be quieter or more sleepy than usual
- Be less aware of what is going on around them or where they are
- Resist care
- Find it hard to concentrate, for example keeping track of a conversation
- Hear or see things that aren't there
- Have vivid dreams
- Be more confused at certain times of day, especially in the evenings and at night
- Feel an urge to wander around
- Suddenly not be able to control their bladder or bowel movements.

If someone has dementia, delirium may be mistaken as the dementia getting worse. It is important to recognise delirium and treat it. If you notice symptoms of delirium, please let their doctor know immediately. You may wish to show them this leaflet to help to explain your concerns.

## What causes delirium?

Delirium has many causes. Often more than one thing causes it to develop.

Some causes are:

- Infection (e.g. urine or chest infection) including COVID-19 (coronavirus)
- Dehydration or malnutrition - not eating or drinking enough (or the right things)
- Untreated pain
- Medicines (e.g. codeine, morphine, diazepam)
- Being constipated or unable to wee
- Recently had surgery
- Being in an unfamiliar place
- Alcohol use or withdrawal.

## How can I prevent delirium?

Delirium can be prevented by reducing the causes (see above). Encouraging regular eating and drinking helps to avoid dehydration and constipation. If the person you care for takes lots of different medicines, ask the doctor or pharmacist to review these.

The treatment for delirium varies, depending on the cause. Give pain relief tablets if the person is in pain and drinks if they're dehydrated or constipated.

## How can I help someone with delirium?

Some of these things may help:

- Keep calm and speak in short, easy to understand sentences
- Remind them where they are and why they are there
- Give constant reassurance, don't argue or disagree
- Remind them of the date and time and let them know what's going on. Make sure they can see a clock and a calendar if possible.
- Keep the room well-lit in the day and dark at night
- Wake people regularly if they're sleeping through the day and encourage them to get up and dressed
- Make sure they have their usual glasses and hearing aids (ensuring batteries work) and use them
- Encourage them to eat and drink, offering frequent drinks and snacks - you may need to prompt them much more than you usually would
- Ensure they have some familiar photos or objects around them and other things that provide comfort like favourite music or a warm blanket
- Limit the number of visitors and reduce noise as much as possible - stimulating the person too much can make things worse
- Make sure they regularly take any prescribed medication, including laxatives and pain killers.

## If someone has delirium and is resisting care, what will help?

Delirium can be very frightening for the person experiencing it and this can lead to them behaving in a way that is out of character for them. If someone is resisting care, this is likely to be because they are distressed. It can help if family or friends sit quietly with the person to help calm them down. They might be prescribed some medicine (a sedative) to help calm them down. If so, the lowest possible dose will be given for the shortest possible time.

## How long does delirium take to get better?

Once the cause of the delirium is found and treated, most people start to improve within a few days. Others may take much longer to get better and this can be a sign of dementia. If you have concerns, please contact their GP for an assessment. Unfortunately, once a person has had delirium, they are more likely to have it again.

For more information about delirium, please watch this Delirium Awareness video:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPfZgBmcQB8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPfZgBmcQB8)

You can also complete a 45-minute online learning course:  
[portal.e-lfh.org.uk/LearningContent/LaunchForGuestAccess/664995](https://portal.e-lfh.org.uk/LearningContent/LaunchForGuestAccess/664995)

We would be grateful for comments and feedback about this leaflet. Please email them to:  
[ENGLAND.YHSCN@nhs.net](mailto:ENGLAND.YHSCN@nhs.net) or complete this survey [www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/QPGH6TQ](https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/QPGH6TQ)