Delirium
Information for patients, carers and their families

Delirium is a common medical problem that is characterised by fluctuating changes in cognitive function. It occurs more often amongst older people. When delirium occurs people are confused and may be either very agitated or quiet and drowsy. The onset of delirium is usually sudden. It usually only lasts for a few days but may persist for longer periods. It can be a serious condition.

Who is at risk of developing delirium?
People who:
• are very sick
• have pre-existing dementia or cognitive decline
• are older (over 65 years) or frail
• suffer from depression
• have poor eyesight/hearing
• are taking multiple medications
• have an alcohol/ drug dependence
• have had a recent surgical procedure
• have had a recent head injury, stroke or intracranial event
• are palliative and during end of life.

What are the symptoms of delirium?
People with delirium may:
• appear confused and forgetful
• be unable to pay attention
• have changes in their communication skills
• be different from their normal selves
• be either very agitated or quiet and withdrawn or sleepy
• be unsure of the time of day or where they are
• have changes to their sleeping habits, such as staying awake at night and being drowsy during the daytime
• feel fearful, suspicious, upset, irritable or sad
• see, hear or feel things that are not there, but seem very real to them
• lose control of their bladder of bowels.

How common is delirium?
About 10 per cent of Australians aged over 70 years have delirium at the time of admission to hospital, and a further 8 per cent develop delirium during a hospital admission. The incidence of delirium is higher in certain hospital settings, with more than 30 per cent of patients with delirium following hip and cardiac surgery or during a stay in intensive care.

What causes delirium?
Common causes of delirium in older people include:
• infection
• multiple physical illnesses
• constipation
• dehydration/malnutrition
• severe pain
• medications, including “over-the-counter” medicines
• heavy alcohol consumption
• withdrawal from alcohol or medications, particularly sleeping pills.

How does delirium start?
The symptoms usually happen very quickly, usually over hours or days. A person’s behaviour can also fluctuate during the course of a single day.
Delirium is sometimes mistaken for dementia, depression or other mental illness, so it is important for family/friends to notify medical/nursing staff of any sudden changes in a person’s thinking and behaviour.

How long does delirium last?
Delirium usually only lasts for a few days but sometimes it will continue for weeks or even months. Delirium may not resolve quickly and can lead to serious complications such as falls, pressure ulcers, longer length of stay in hospital and even death.

Will delirium recur?
People who have experienced delirium do have a higher risk of experiencing delirium again.

How is delirium treated?
Delirium is generally associated with an underlying physical illness. However it is not always possible to identify the cause.

Staff will do a thorough medical assessment to look for and treat the underlying cause/s of the delirium. Treatment may include use of medication and environmental strategies with the aim of reducing the risk of complications and lessoning symptoms.

Role of family and carers
- Family members/carers can provide valuable information to staff caring for the person with delirium. Greater understanding of an individual can help staff form a more personalised behaviour management plan
- It is important to notify staff of any sudden changes in a person’s mental or physical condition.

How can you help care for someone with delirium?
- it is reassuring for people with delirium to see familiar people. Visit as often as you can, and encourage other family members and friends to help as well
- speak slowly in a clear voice when talking to someone who has delirium. Identify both yourself and the person by name and introduce the topic
- it is important not to argue with your relative/friend when they are suffering from delirium even if you do not agree with what they are saying
- encourage and assist someone with delirium to have adequate food and fluids
- knowing the time of day can reduce confusion. Remind them where they are, and what day and time it is. Open the curtains/blinds in their room
- visual or hearing impairment can make their confusion worse. If someone with delirium usually wears glasses or hearing aids, help them to put them on
- if someone with delirium is agitated or aggressive, do not try to restrain them. If they want to walk around, let them, but make sure they are safe from falling and that the area is free from hazards
- bring personal mementos that help remind the person of home, such as photos, their dressing gown, radio or CD/tape player with favourite music
- let staff know any special personal information that may help calm and orientate someone with delirium, such as: the names of family and friends, hobbies, significant events etc.

Delirium care in the Sunshine Coast Hospital and Health Service
On admission to hospital, patients are reviewed by doctors and various allied health staff. Your relative/friend may be cared for in a single room to provide an environment with decreased stimuli. They may require constant supervision by a nurse.

The staff may ask you to bring in a few personal items to place in an orientation box. This is used to orientate your relative/friend to familiar objects.

Whilst in hospital, and suffering from delirium, your relative/friend may be involved in a number of activities designed to help them settle into the environment.

In some instances, especially if frail or elderly, your friend/relative may be referred to a specialist Geriatric Team for further assessment and treatment.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your relative/friend please do not hesitate to ask staff.

Contacts:
National Dementia Hotline: 1800 100 500
www.fightdementia.org.au/services/helpline

My Aged Care: 1800 200 422
www.myagedcare.gov.au

Carers Australia: 1800 242 636
www.carersaustralia.com.au