

Delirium in the Hospital

Delirium is a severe state of confusion. It often happens quickly and can come and go. It may involve changes in thinking, attention and perception. Most often this lasts for a short time.

Causes

Patients in the hospital are at high risk for developing delirium. It is especially true for patients in the ICU. Experts think delirium is due to changes in the way the brain is working. Causes may include:

- severe illness
- infections
- not enough oxygen
- alcohol withdrawal
- certain medicines
- lack of sleep
- other treatments needed while in the hospital

Signs of Delirium

The staff is trained to know and treat delirium. Signs of delirium may change from day to day. Patients may be confused or not act as usual. They may see or hear things that are not there. Some people are unable to think or speak clearly or pay attention. Others have trouble staying awake or mix up days and nights.

Treatment

Treatment depends upon the cause of delirium. When patients become more stable, we try to keep patients comfortable yet alert, review the need for medical devices each day and remove them as soon as possible, and get patients out of bed.

What You Can Do

While staff provides a safe setting, you can help support your loved one and help them

feel safe. If your loved one has a normal routine, please share this with the nurse. See below for other ideas that can help.

Provide a Calming Environment

- Reduce noise by turning off the TV and radio.
- Speak in a calm voice and use simple words to help your loved one know what is going on.
- Bring in family photos or known items to give comfort. Do not bring valuables.
- Be sure your loved one has hearing aids, glasses, or any other devices needed.
- Use good lighting. Keep the lights on during the day and into the early evening. This helps to prevent confusion of voices and sounds. Dim the lights at night.

Provide Comfort

- Sit with your loved one. Your company can be very helpful.
- Remind them of the day and date.
- Talk about familiar things such as family, friends and hobbies.
- When your loved one is confused, it is ok to say “yes, you are confused.” Let them know it will likely go away.

After the Hospital

Talk about delirium and what happened in the hospital. This can help people sort out which memories are true and those that are not. Let your primary doctor know that you or your loved one had delirium in the hospital.

Seeing your loved one with delirium can make you upset and leave you feeling helpless. Talk with the nurse or doctor about any concerns you may have. We are here to help you and your loved one.

If you are a patient receiving care at UnityPoint – Meriter, Swedish American or a health system outside of UW Health, please use the phone numbers provided in your discharge instructions for any questions or concerns.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 7/2018 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#7161