

WHAT IS DELIRIUM?

Delirium is a sudden decline in cognition, behaviour and attention that can occur over days or even hours.

It has many causes including illness, surgery, pain, constipation, medications and even not getting enough to drink. It usually improves when the underlying condition gets better. It can be frightening – not only for the person who is unwell, but also for those around them.

WHO IS AT RISK?

- Older people – the risk increases with age.
- Older people taking multiple medicines.
- People with dementia.
- People who are dehydrated (loss of water in their body).
- People with an infection.
- Severely ill people.
- People who have had surgery, especially hip surgery.
- People who are nearing the end of their life.
- People who have a temperature.
- Older people with constipation or urinary retention.

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO HAVE DELIRIUM?

The person you care for may:

- Be less aware of what is going on around them.
- Be unsure about where they are or what they are doing there.
- Be unable to follow a conversation or be able to speak clearly.
- Have vivid dreams, which are often frightening and may carry on when they wake up.
- Hear noises or voices when there is nothing or no one causing them.
- See people or things which aren't there.
- Worry that other people are trying to harm them.
- Be very agitated or restless, unable to sit still and wandering about.
- Be very slow or sleepy.
- Sleep during the day, but wake up at night.
- Have moods that change quickly.
- They can be frightened, anxious, depressed or irritable.
- Be more confused at some times than at others – often in the evening or at night.

HOW CAN I HELP SOMEONE WITH DELIRIUM?

You can help someone with delirium feel calmer if you:

- Stay calm.
- Talk to them in short, simple sentences.
- Check that they have understood you. Repeat things if necessary.
- Try not to agree with any unusual or incorrect ideas, but tactfully distract them or change the subject.
- Reassure them. Remind them of what is happening and how they are doing.
- Orientate them. Remind them of the time and date. If this upsets them it is important NOT to argue with them.
- Make sure they can see a clock or a calendar.
- Try to make sure that someone they know well is with them. This is often most important during the evening, when delirium often gets worse. If they are in hospital, bring in some familiar objects from home. Ensure they have a "getting to know what matters to me" document completed - Ask staff.
- Make sure they have their glasses and hearing aid.
- Help them to eat and drink.
- A light on at night so that they can see where they are if they wake up.