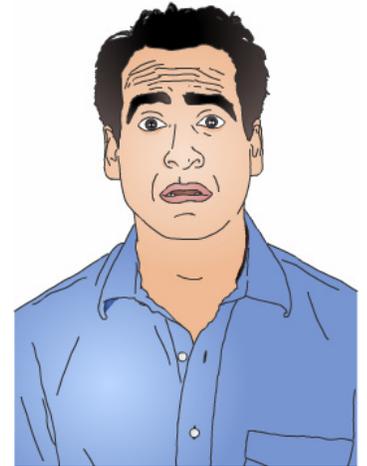


Introduction

Delirium is a complex symptom where a person becomes confused and shows significant changes in behavior and mental state. Signs of delirium include problems with attention and awareness, emotions and muscle control. There are many medical conditions that can cause delirium. People with delirium often, though not always, make a full recovery after the underlying cause is treated.

This reference summary explains delirium. It discusses how delirium is diagnosed and treated, and includes information on how to prevent delirium.



Delirium

Delirium is a complex symptom that is usually caused by a medical condition. Signs of delirium include problems with:

- Attention and awareness.
- Thinking and memory.
- Emotion.
- Muscle control.
- Sleeping and waking.

The signs of delirium are managed by treating the underlying cause of the medical condition causing the delirium.

Delirium usually develops quickly over a few hours or a few days. It often is temporary and reversible. But delirium is still a serious condition and it should be diagnosed and treated immediately.



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Signs

Signs of delirium usually come and go throughout the day. There may be times when a person shows no signs of delirium. The signs of delirium appear quickly. They may develop over a few hours to a few days.

A major sign of delirium is a decreased understanding of situations and surroundings. A person with delirium might:

- Have difficulty staying focused on a topic.
- Get stuck on an idea rather than responding to questions or conversation.
- Be easily distracted by things that are not important.

Another sign of delirium is poor thinking skills. This may result in:

- Poor memory.
- Not recognizing where one is, who one is, or what time of day it is.
- Difficulty speaking and understanding language.
- Rambling or nonsense speech.
- Difficulty reading or writing.

Some other common signs of delirium include:

- Extreme fear, anxiety, anger, depression or other emotions.
- Hallucinations, or seeing things that aren't there.
- Irritability or combative behavior.
- Little or no activity.
- Little or no response to the environment.
- Restless sleep.



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There are some other medical conditions that can cause symptoms similar to the signs associated with delirium. It may be difficult to tell the difference between delirium and other medical conditions. Dementia can be confused with delirium. Dementia is the progressive loss of intellectual capacity and memory. It produces signs similar to those of delirium. But delirium is often sudden and temporary, where dementia is progressive and permanent.

If someone close to you shows any signs of delirium, you should see a health care provider. Your loved one may not be in a position to seek help.

Causes

Delirium happens when the brain is no longer able to work correctly. This can be caused by infections, poisons, severe pain or substance abuse.

Risk Factors

Healthcare providers know of factors that can increase the chances of experiencing delirium. These are known as risk factors.

Elderly people recovering in a hospital or living in a long-term care facility have an increased risk of developing delirium.

Improper nutrition is another risk factor for delirium. Also, people who are dehydrated are more likely to develop delirium.

People with a long-term, severe or terminal illness are also at an increased risk of experiencing delirium. HIV or AIDS are just two examples.

Other risk factors for delirium include:

- Old age.
- Impaired vision or hearing.
- Treatments involving multiple drugs.
- Alcohol or drug abuse.



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There are also some factors that commonly trigger delirium in at-risk people. These include:

- Certain medications.
- Excessive alcohol or drug use.
- Alcohol or drug withdrawal.
- Emotional stress.

Other triggers for delirium in at-risk people include:

- Surgery and intensive care.
- Sudden or severe illness.
- Infections.



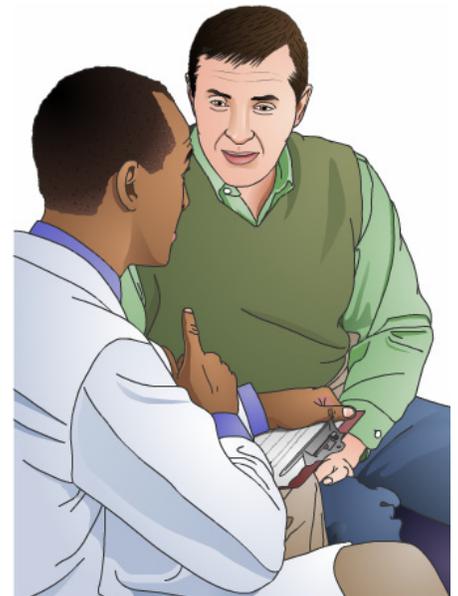
Diagnosis

If you have a friend or relative who shows signs of delirium, you need to help. The person under your care will not be able to make his or her own appointments or provide information due to impaired thinking skills.

To assist your health care provider in making a diagnosis, make a list of the medications the person currently takes. This includes prescriptions, over-the-counter medications and dietary supplements. You should also provide your health care provider with the names and contact information of any other health care providers who have assisted the person.

It is also important to record information about any symptoms the person under your care has shown. Your health care provider will want to know when the symptoms started, a description of the symptoms, and any changes in behavior.

A health care provider will diagnose delirium based on the answers you provided about the person's medical history. Your health care provider will also need to run tests to assess the person's mental status and identify possible factors that contributed to the condition. A health care provider begins the diagnosis by assessing the person's awareness, attention and thinking. He or she will ask questions and may conduct medical tests that assess perception and memory, mental state and confusion.



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Next, your health care provider will perform a physical exam to check for signs of other medical problems or disease such as:

- Dehydration.
- Infection.
- Alcohol withdrawal.

Delirium may be the first or only sign of a serious condition, such as a stroke.

A neurological exam can also help determine if a stroke or other brain disease is causing the delirium. This test checks:

- Vision.
- Balance.
- Coordination.
- Reflexes.

A neurological exam is a series of questions and tests to check brain, spinal cord, and nerve function. The exam checks a person's mental status, coordination, ability to walk, and how well the muscles, sensory systems and deep tendon reflexes work. If no cause of delirium can be found, other tests like blood or urine tests may be ordered. A brain imaging test is frequently recommended.

Treatment

To manage delirium, health care providers must identify the underlying cause of delirium. For example, stopping the use of a certain medication may cause the symptoms of delirium to go away. A person with delirium may need a long period of recovery. This could take place either in a care facility or at home.

Sometimes delirium will only last a few hours, but it can also last as long as several weeks or months. When the different factors that contributed to the delirium are treated, the recovery time is usually shorter.

Once the underlying cause has been removed, treatment begins to focus on creating an environment that allows the person's body to heal and their mind to relax. This is known as supportive care.



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Supportive care includes helping the person feel physically comfortable by:

- Keeping the person hydrated and nourished.
- Protecting airways to ensure the person is breathing properly.
- Assisting the person with movement to prevent accidents.
- Treating pain with medications suggested by the healthcare provider.



Supportive care also includes things to help the person stay mentally fit. This may be done by:

- Surrounding them with familiar objects from home.
- Opening blinds during daylight to promote a regular sleep-wake cycle.
- Verbal reminders of where the person is and what is happening.
- Visits from family members.

Supportive care also includes things to help the person stay emotionally fit by:

- Avoiding changes in surroundings and caregiver staff.
- Avoiding physical restraints and bladder tubes.
- Using music, massage, and relaxation techniques.
- Getting out of bed to walk, use the bathroom and groom.

Medications also may be used to calm a person. This kind of drug treatment is only used when the person becomes severely agitated or confused. When drug treatment is required, antipsychotic medication is usually used. It may lessen the disorganized thinking that accompanies delirium.

Summary

Delirium is a set of complex symptoms caused by an underlying medical condition or substance abuse. It usually develops over 1-2 days and often is temporary and reversible.

Delirium happens when the brain is no longer able to work correctly. This can be caused by infections, poisons, severe pain or substance abuse.

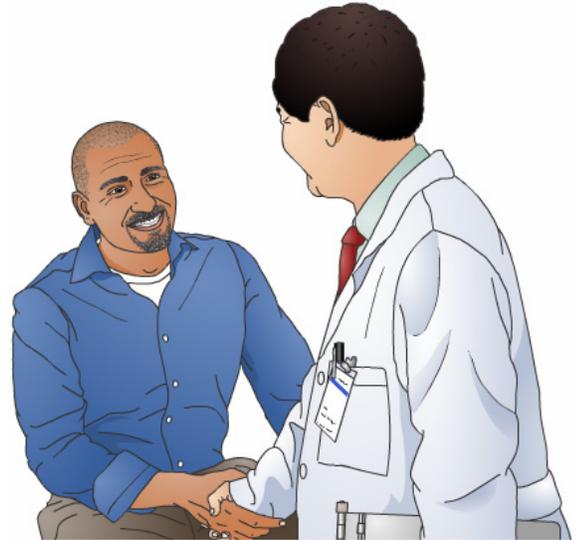
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A major sign of delirium is a decreased understanding of situations and surroundings. Another sign of delirium is poor thinking skills.

If you have a friend or relative who shows signs of delirium, you should assist him or her in seeking medical help. The person under your care will not be able to make his or her own appointments or provide the doctor with information related to his or her condition due to impaired thinking skills.

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People with delirium often, though not always, make a full recovery after their underlying illness is treated.



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