

Preventing delirium while in the hospital



What is delirium?

When an older person becomes ill and goes into the hospital, there is an increased risk of developing delirium and other problems.

Delirium is when a sudden and usually temporary state of confusion develops. It may occur during an illness, after surgery or with new medications.

It is different than dementia which is a condition that develops over many months or years. Delirium is a serious condition, and if you notice that your loved one is acting unusual and out of character, please tell staff right away.

This pamphlet describes simple care you can do to prevent delirium. These measures can also help to decrease the severity of delirium.

What does delirium look like?

People with delirium can act confused and may:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have trouble paying attention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be forgetful
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be restless and upset 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have trouble concentrating
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • slur their speech 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • startle easily to any sound or touch
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ramble and jump from topic to topic • see and hear imaginary things 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not know where they are • have trouble staying awake
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mix up days and nights 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sometimes act confused and then be suddenly okay
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • drift into sleep during conversations 	

Who is at risk for delirium?

People who:

- are age 65 years of age or older
- have a history of dementia, depression or stroke
- are not functionally independent
- have difficulty seeing and/or hearing
- have not been eating well or drinking well
- take many different pills
- have many different illnesses
- are having surgery

How can you prevent delirium?

Simple ways to prevent delirium:

1. **Vision and Hearing:** It is very important that glasses and hearing aids are worn while in the hospital. Hearing amplifiers are available for patients. Ask your nurse about the possibility of borrowing one.



Ask staff for a magnifying glass if your loved one is having trouble seeing. Arrange for an eye examination after your loved one leaves the hospital.

2. **Mobility/Walking:** People need to continue walking even when they are ill. Try to walk at least 3 times a day. Ask the nurse or physiotherapist if your loved one needs help with walking. Physiotherapists are specialists in walking and can provide expert help if needed. If your loved one is able, walk with them in the hallway even if for a short distance. Talk to staff about the plan for walking. If the person stops walking, talk to the staff about why this has happened and ask about the plan to get the patient walking again.

Encourage your loved one to frequently bend and move their legs and arms while in bed or in a chair to prevent stiffness of joints.

- Please bring mobility aides such as walkers or canes from home if you can. Let the staff know so that they can label them.
- As well, ensure that your loved one has non-slid socks or slippers to walk safely.

Physiotherapists are specialists in walking and can provide expert help if needed.

Encourage your loved one to continue with his/her usual routine (if possible) of maintaining hygiene.

To help with getting out of bed:

- Try to encourage the patient to be up and out of bed for every meal.
- Question the use of restraints and discuss your thinking and feeling about the risk for injury associated with restraints with staff.
- Ask when urinary catheter and/or IV tubes can come out.



3. Dehydration (being too dry):

Dehydration occurs when there is too little water in the body.

Ensure your loved one is sitting up while drinking.



Sometimes patients will be limited in how much they can drink because of their medical condition.

Please ask staff if your loved one can drink normal amounts of fluids. If yes, try to encourage your loved one to drink 6 to 8 glasses of fluid daily.

Inform staff immediately if your loved one starts coughing while drinking. This may indicate a swallowing problem.

To encourage drinking fluids:

- Offer frequent sips of fluids throughout your visit in a casual way. Keep a relaxed social conversation going as you offer fluids.
- Have a drink together. People take in more when someone is drinking with them.

Maintain a clean fresh mouth. Use mouthwash and offer to brush dentures. With a clean mouth, your loved one may feel more like eating and drinking.

4. **Eating:** Many people lose interest in eating when they become ill.

- Try to arrange visits at meal times.
- Clean dentures before eating.
- Encourage sitting up in a chair during meals.
- Help to complete the menu.
- If your loved one does not like the food, ask about food choices or bring in favourite foods.
- Tell the staff right away if you notice coughing while eating. This may mean there is a swallowing problem.
- If your loved one lost a significant amount or unexpected weight within the last months, let the staff know.
- Encourage your loved one to clean his/her dentures after eating or to brush their teeth.



5. **Sleep:** Sleep is often disrupted while in hospital. Being ill, hospital noise, decreased exercise, pain and many other conditions can interfere with sleep.

- Talk with the staff about usual bedtime routines.
- Encourage walking during the day.
- Limit daytime sleeping.
- Offer a backrub if visiting at night.
- Discourage your loved one from drinking tea, coffee and coke after 3:00 pm.
- Offer a warm blanket, warm flannel blankets may be available from the blanket warmer and can be very soothing.
- Discourage your loved one to ask for pills for sleep. They can contribute to confusion, falls and daytime drowsiness the next day.
- Encourage your loved one to have a warm non-caffeinated beverage, such as milk, and eat a light snack an hour before usual sleep time.
- Keep a soft light in the room.



6. Activities and mental stimulation:

Activities that bring pleasure are an important part of recovery.

Please consider bringing in:

- favourite music
- magazines, newspapers, cross word puzzles
- favourite pictures which may trigger conversations
- a calendar, talk about the current season
- discuss pleasant events from past and present
- visit your loved one often and coordinate visits with friends and relatives
- ensure that your loved one wears glasses and hearing aids if they normally wear them at home



If delirium develops

- Tell the staff right away if you see a change in thinking.
- Develop a plan of care with the staff to help with the confusion.
- Try to redirect to current season, date and place. Explain why they are in the hospital. You may need to repeat this many times. Do not argue if they see things differently.
- Continue to ensure glasses and hearing aids are worn if needed.
- Continue to ensure your loved one is eating and drinking well. Ask your nurse if it is okay to feed your love one.
- Continue to encourage walking.



Care for the caregivers

Looking after a person in hospital can be hard. Family members tell us they get very tired and sometimes feel very guilty when they are not at the hospital.

- Ensure other family members know the person is in the hospital. Ask them to help with the simple ways described in this pamphlet.
- If you become very tired, cut back on the length of your visits or how often you visit. Let the staff know you are doing this.
- Be sure to continue with activities that relax you. Plan for a break each day.
- Try to arrange for family members to visit at different times throughout the day.

Going home

Begin to ask about going home early during the hospital stay. Try to avoid being caught unprepared. While in the hospital and before going home ask these questions:

- Does my loved one now have new health problems? Is there anything I need to do to help them at home?
 - Are there any changes in the medication? Are there any side effects I need to watch for? What do I do if I see side effects?
 - Are there any services in the community that might help such as a Day Program, DARTS, and Meals on Wheels?
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Parking

Monthly hospital parking passes are available at the Parking Office at each hospital site.

Please call the Parking Office at the hospital site your loved one is at to get more information.

Hamilton General Hospital Parking Office	Ext. 44061
Juravinski Hospital Parking Office	Ext. 42354
McMaster University Medical Centre Parking Office	Ext. 76156

Things to bring to the hospital

Storage space on the ward is limited. However, you are encouraged to bring in personal items to support your loved one's hospital stay. If possible, label the personal items before bringing them in.

Please bring patient's own:

- Comfortable, loose fitting clothing including a dressing gown or robe.
 - Slippers with non-slip soles or shoes.
 - Eye glasses and hearing aid(s) with extra batteries.
 - Dentures and denture supplies.
 - Hairbrush, shaving supplies, deodorant, lotion, shampoo, toothbrush and toothpaste.
 - Books or magazines of interest.
 - Pictures of family and friends.
 - List of telephone numbers of family and friends.
 - Familiar comfort objects, such as a pillow case or blanket.
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Do not bring:

- Money or valuables.

Medications

Please bring a list of all of your medications, including herbal, over-the-counter and vitamins and give it to your nurse. If you have any concerns about your medications please discuss this with your nurse, pharmacist and/or doctor.

Notes:
