

Information sheet – Delirium

supporting your loved one



We describe delirium as a change in your loved one's mental state, with either clouded or muddled thinking. You or your family/whanau will see a change in behaviour. This can happen suddenly or over a few days.

What you might notice:

- Your loved one may experience agitation, fidgeting, irritability, and/or mood swings
- They may slur their speech or words, ramble or have slow or incoherent speech
- They may become increasingly drowsy and sluggishness
- Have changes to their concentration, and have trouble focusing
- Feelings of anxiety, disorientation or suspiciousness may increase
- Hallucinations (this can mean seeing things or hearing things which are not there).
- Increased sleeping during the day and more wakeful at night
- Symptoms may worsen in the evening – this is called sundowning

Delirium is when a person's mental state changes, making their thinking feel unclear or confused. This can cause changes in their behavior, and it can happen suddenly or develop over a few days.

Causes

Delirium may occur at any stage of an illness, and it is a common and an expected part of the last days of life. If it is appropriate there are some treatments that can help delirium, especially if it is clear what is causing it. This would require the GP to do a medical assessment and some investigations, like a blood test.

The things your GP/RN might want to know are:

- What are the changes in behavior pattern?
- Any signs or symptoms of infection?
- Are they eating and drinking?
- Are the bowels and bladder working?
- Low mood and wandering?
- Current medications, and any recent changes to medication?

Things that may help

- Create calm and peaceful settings, avoid loud noises, over stimulation, TV, and loud music
- Try to keep your loved one safe
- Reassure gently 'I am right here with you'
- Familiar faces, routines, and environments
- Having an easy to read clock handy, or wearing a watch can help your loved one to keep track of time

- Avoid asking questions or disagreeing with ‘muddled thoughts,’ what your loved one is seeing or hearing is very real for the person.
- Night light on at night
- Offer favourite drinks, food

If you or your whanau are feeling unsafe with the risk of physical harm, or your loved one is in danger of hurting themselves, phone for an ambulance.

Caring for and seeing your loved one experiencing delirium can be difficult. This is the time to wrap support around you with family/whanau and friends.

- Hospice Otago has a great podcast series for Carers.

Please see the below link which has some helpful information for whanau and caregivers.

- [Ending Life Well Podcast | Otago Community Hospice](#)

Or you can either put ‘Ending Life Well’ into your search engine, find the podcast on the Hospice NZ website, or listen to it on Spotify/Apple/iHeart radio.

Kind acknowledgement to Otago Community Hospice for sharing this information.