

## Delirium is *different* than dementia

### Delirium

- Delirium comes on quickly, in hours or days.
- Signs of delirium can change from one day to the next.
- Delirium can make memory and thinking problems worse.
- Delirium is usually reversible, often lasts days to weeks, but may last longer.

### Dementia

- Dementia is usually a non-reversible condition.
- Dementia is the loss of cognitive functioning — thinking, remembering and reasoning — and behavioral abilities to such an extent that it interferes with a person's daily life and activities. (<https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/alzheimers>)
- Dementia is a disturbance of thinking. It develops slowly over months or even years.
- Patients with dementia are more likely to develop delirium.

References:  
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## DELIRIUM

### Patient/Family Guide



For more information, visit  
[UFHealth.org/delirium](https://UFHealth.org/delirium)



### What is delirium?

It may present as extreme confusion with increased agitation or decreased activity and fatigue.

#### People with delirium:

- Cannot think clearly
- Have trouble paying attention
- Have a hard time understanding what is going on around them.
- May see or hear things that are not present, but seem very real to them.

**Delirium is common.** About 2 out of 3 patients in ICUs get delirium.

7 out of 10 patients get delirium while they are on a breathing machine or soon after.

Delirium is associated with thinking and memory problems that can last for months.

### People most likely to get delirium

#### People who:

- Have dementia
- Are advanced in age
- Have surgery, especially hip or heart surgery
- Have depression
- Take certain high-risk medicines
- Have poor eyesight or hearing
- Have an infection or sepsis
- Have heart failure

### Risk factors for delirium

Experts think delirium is caused by a change in the way the brain is working.

#### This can be caused by:

- Low oxygen levels
- Chemical changes in the brain
- Infections
- Severe pain
- Sleep disturbances
- Anemia
- Dehydration causing electrolyte abnormalities
- Prolonged immobility
- Constipation
- Urinary retention
- High-risk medications, including sedatives and pain medications
- Withdrawal from medications and substances (i.e. alcohol, cocaine)

### Signs of delirium

#### Your family member may:

- Appear agitated or aggressive
- Increased fatigue
- Increased time sleeping
- Using inappropriate words
- Not following directions
- Limited attention span
- Emotional changes

## How to help a patient with delirium

- Avoid confrontation
- Gentle reorientation if needed
- Maintain day/night orientation — lights on during the day, limit daytime naps
- Keep daily board information updated/visible
- Offer a snack
- Mobilize
- Speak softly and use simple words or phrases
- Talk about family and friends
- Bring glasses, hearing aids, dentures
- Decorate the room with calendars, posters or family pictures. These familiar items might be reminders of home
- Provide the patient with favorite music or TV shows. If your loved one has delirium, we might ask you to sit and help calm them

