
Need to Know for Patients and Families

*What patients
and their
families need to
know before
hospitalization
or a nursing
home admission*

Delirium

Delirium is a new, sudden, and serious confusion episode that may change throughout the day or night. A person with delirium will have difficulty paying attention. There also may be a change in alertness or ability to think. Delirium is different from dementia.

Why Is It Important? Delirium can cause problems for older adults and their families. Delirium can last for hours or weeks. Delirium is a problem in any unfamiliar setting such as a hospital with different routines and people. Anesthesia and surgery can increase risk of delirium.

What Family/Friends Can Do:

- Tell the nurses and doctors what is “normal” for your family member when he or she is not in the hospital. Tell them about any changes.
- Be present, visit often. Let your loved one know you are there. Try to orient them to day and time but do not “force reality” or argue.
- Bring in personal items from home that can help the person, such as pictures, glasses, hearing aids, dentures, maybe favorite foods if permitted.
- Get your loved one moving! Encourage walks and even sitting in a chair. Activity can prevent and/or shorten the delirium.
- Ask the nurses to check if your loved one is in pain and in need of pain medication. Be alert for signs of pain such as grimacing, restlessness, or not wanting to move or receive care.
- Use a notebook as a “guest book” so your loved one can see that people are coming to visit them.