

When Confusion Strikes Quickly: Recognizing and Preventing Delirium

Transcript

[0:00 What is delirium?]

Dr. Anthony Levinson: Delirium is a condition that causes a person to become confused. It is not a specific disease itself; but a change in a person's attention, awareness, and thinking that develops over a short period of time caused by one or more *other* medical conditions or drugs. The signs and symptoms tend to fluctuate or vary throughout the day. Finding and trying to treat the underlying cause or causes is key to trying to reverse the delirium. Delirium usually lasts about 1 week but can persist for longer. Most people with delirium have a full recovery.

While delirium can happen to anyone, anywhere, it often occurs when someone is in the hospital.

People experiencing delirium may become more physically active or agitated, or less active or sluggish, or have a mixed level of activity that changes throughout the day. They may not be able to understand when people are trying to help them. They may become angry with family or hospital or long-term care staff. They may start to think that everyone is against them or are trying to harm them. Some people with delirium may want to call the police to get help. Because of their confusion they may also be at increased risk of falling, and often experience emotional distress.

[1:30 What causes delirium?]

Dr. Anthony Levinson: Delirium is caused by a change in the way the brain is working, and it is not clear why or how it develops. There are many potential causes, including infections, medications, organ failure (such as heart failure, COPD, kidney or liver problems), recent surgeries, and drug or alcohol intoxication or withdrawal. The underlying condition is not necessarily a brain disease.

Some examples include urinary tract infections (or UTI's) or pneumonia; dehydration; time after surgery (called the post-operative period) when pain, the use of anaesthesia, or pain medications may cause delirium to develop, especially in older people.

[2:19 Who is at greatest risk for delirium?]

Dr. Anthony Levinson: Delirium can happen at any age. People are more likely to get delirium if they already have memory or thinking problems, are 65 years of age or older, have surgery (especially hip or heart surgery), have depression, take certain medications (for example, strong pain medications, such as opioids), have poor eyesight or hearing, have an infection or other

severe illness, have heart failure, have significant alcohol or substance use issues, or have had delirium before.

[04:23 Signs and symptoms of delirium]

Dr. Anthony Levinson: The characteristics of delirium include the following.

- Disturbed attention or awareness, so the person is easily distracted or has difficulty following what is being said.
- Develops over a short period of time and fluctuates. Delirium comes on usually over a period of hours to a few days, and tends to fluctuate in severity during the course of a day.
- Disorganized thinking, saying things that are mixed up or don't make sense.
- Memory changes, such as not being able to remember names, places, dates, or other important information.
- Hallucinating, like seeing or hearing things which are not real or misinterpreting sights and sounds.
- Having delusions, for example, paranoid ideas of others trying to harm them.
- Feeling restless or not being able to stay still; having trouble sleeping or reversed night-day sleep-wake cycle; climbing out of bed.
- Changing activity levels from being restless or 'hyperactive' to being drowsy or sleepier than usual or 'hypoactive'.
- Emotional disturbances such as anxiety, fear, depression, irritability, anger, or apathy.

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