

Delirium: How you can help

Many older adults are at risk for delirium. Delirium is a condition that comes on quickly (within hours or days) and affects the brain. It can often be prevented, but if it develops, it needs to be treated right away.

Family members and friends can do a lot to help prevent delirium. They can also support the health-care team to deal with the symptoms of delirium.

For more information about delirium, read RNAO's fact sheet, *Delirium, dementia and depression: What is the difference?*



Preventing delirium

Help prevent delirium. Here are some things family and friends can do for those at risk:

- Make sure the at-risk person wears glasses and hearing aids (if applicable)
- Have a clock and calendar in the at-risk person's room
- Make sure the room has enough light to see clearly
- Keep them company; talk to them or enjoy a quiet activity
- Speak clearly
- Avoid too much stimulation and keep the room calm and quiet
- Encourage them to rest and get good sleep
- Encourage them to eat well and drink fluids
- Help them to get up and move around (if possible)
- Help make sure their pain is properly managed

Continued on page 2

What should I do if my family member/friend develops delirium?

Delirium can be scary for sufferers. Having a family member or friend stay with them to remind them where they are, reassure them, and help keep them calm can be helpful. Many things that help prevent delirium can also help to manage it. Here are some other things you can do to help:

- Place a soft light in the person's room at night
- Remind them where they are, the date, time and season
- Gently assure them they are safe and all is well
- Make a list of family and close friends who are able to stay with the person around the clock
- Bring familiar photos into the room
- Softly play music they enjoy
- Look after yourself, get some rest and try to relax whenever you can
- Try to keep a positive attitude and remember that, with treatment, the signs of delirium may go away or decrease

Remember: you are not alone. The health-care team is there to support you.

Staying safe

Sometimes a person with delirium sees or hears things that aren't there. They might feel a threat that is not real. They might try to protect or defend themselves. Your safety is important. Remain calm and call the health-care provider if you are afraid of getting hurt.

Getting help

Talk to a health-care provider right away if you or someone you know shows signs of delirium. They can arrange for a proper assessment and connect you to the care or treatment you need. Also, ask them where you can get more information or support. See RNAO's related fact sheet: *Delirium, dementia and depression: What is the difference?* for more information on this topic.

This fact sheet was developed to go with the RNAO best practice guideline (BPG) *Delirium, dementia, and depression: Assessment and care, Second Edition* (2016). It is intended to increase your knowledge, and help you take part in decisions about your health or the health of a family member. RNAO's BPGs are available for public viewing and free download at RNAO.ca/bestpractices