

Understanding Delirium

Online version with active resource links at: cancer-help.me/delirium

What is Delirium?¹

A sudden change in a person's state of mind, with a change in their attention and thinking that can come and go. It results in confused thinking and reduced awareness of the environment.

Delirium can be the first sign of an infection or other serious health condition that should be addressed sooner, rather than later.

As a friend or family member, you know the person better than the care team. You may be the first person to see changes that may indicate the person is experiencing delirium. Input from a family member or caregiver may be important for a doctor to make an accurate diagnosis.

Signs and symptoms of delirium usually begin over a few hours or a few days. They often fluctuate throughout the day, and there may be periods of no symptoms. Symptoms tend to be worse during the night when it's dark and things look less familiar.²

Content adapted from websites below and: ¹ Health in Aging Foundation, <http://www.healthinaging.org/>
²From: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/delirium/symptoms-causes/syc-20371386>

Contact the patient's doctor right away if you see any of the following symptoms:

- Confusion
- Frequent mood swings
- Memory loss, including forgetting recent events or family members' names
- Sudden changes in personality or emotional state
- Decreased attention or concentration
- Periods of alertness that come and go throughout the day
- Hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that are not there)
- Insomnia and changes in usual sleep patterns (difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep or changes in usual sleep patterns)
- Slower movements or unusually restless movements
- Changes in speech, such as saying things that don't make sense

Delirium and Dementia²

Dementia and delirium may be particularly difficult to distinguish, and a person may have both. In fact, people with dementia are at higher risk for developing delirium. Dementia is the progressive worsening of memory and other thinking skills due to gradual changes in the brain. The most common cause of dementia is Alzheimer's disease. Some differences between the symptoms of delirium and dementia include:

- **Onset.** The onset of delirium occurs within a short time (hours to days, perhaps weeks), while dementia usually begins with relatively minor symptoms that gradually worsen over time (months and years).
- **Attention.** The ability to stay focused or maintain attention is significantly affected with delirium. A person in the early stages of dementia remains generally alert.
- **Fluctuation.** The appearance of delirium symptoms can change and vary significantly and frequently throughout the day. While people with dementia have better and worse times of day, their memory and thinking skills stay at a fairly constant level during the course of a day.

Resources for Additional Information:

- [American Delirium Society](#)
- [American Cancer Society, Confusion and Delirium](#)
- [NIH, National Cancer Institute, Delirium \(PDQ®\)](#)
- [Mayo Clinic, Delirium](#)

Recursos en Español:

- [American Cancer Society, Confusión y delirio](#)
- [NIH, Instituto Nacional Del Cáncer, Delirio](#)