Delirium is different from 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 usually clears up after a few days or even a week.

**DEMENTIA**
- Usually dementia is a permanent condition.
- Dementia is a disturbance of thinking. It comes on over months or even years.
- Patients with dementia are more likely to develop delirium.

Does delirium cause thinking problems after a patient leaves the hospital?

- Research shows that patients who develop delirium might have dementia-like thinking problems that can last for months.
- At this time we cannot predict who might develop dementia-like thinking problems.

How you can help

- Speak softly and use simple words or phrases
- Remind the patient of the day and date.
- Talk about family and friends.
- Bring glasses, hearing aids.
- 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.

In the Intensive Care Unit

Delirium

A guide for families and patients

ICU Delirium & Cognitive Impairment Study Group

www.ICUdelirium.org

for questions, please email delirium@vanderbilt.edu

www.ICUdelirium.org
What is delirium?
The word “delirium” is used to describe a severe state of confusion. 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 there. These things seem very real to them.

Delirium is common
• About 2 out of 3 patients in ICUs get delirium.
• Seven out of 10 patients get delirium while they are on a breathing machine or soon after.

Causes of delirium
Experts think delirium is caused by a change in the way the brain is working. This can be caused by:
• less oxygen to the brain
• the brain’s inability to use oxygen
• chemical changes in the brain
• certain medicines
• infections
• severe pain
• medical illnesses
• alcohol, sedatives, or pain killers
• withdrawal from alcohol, nicotine

People most likely to get delirium
People who
• have dementia
• are advanced in age
• have surgery, especially hip or heart
• have depression
• take certain high-risk medicines
• have poor eyesight or hearing
• have an infection or sepsis
• have heart failure

Signs of delirium
Your family member may
• appear agitated or even quiet
• be confused
• be aggressive
• use inappropriate words
• not be able to pay attention or follow directions
• be unsure about where they are
• be unsure about the time of day
• see things that are not there
• act different from usual
• have changes in sleeping habits
• have emotional changes
• have movements that are not normal, like tremors or picking at clothes
• have memory problems