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Professional Resources for Care, Catering & Hospitality

FREE PROFESSIONAL RESOURCE

Delirium Awareness

A Practical Guide for Care Staff

Knowledge Hub Resource 050

Version 1.0

First Published: August 2026



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Introduction

Delirium is a serious medical condition that causes a sudden change in a person's mental state, affecting their attention, awareness and thinking. It develops quickly, often over a few hours or days, and is particularly common in older adults and people with existing health conditions.

Unlike dementia, which usually develops gradually over months or years, delirium has a rapid onset and is often caused by an underlying illness, infection, dehydration, medication changes or other medical problems. Delirium is a medical emergency that requires prompt recognition and assessment.

Care staff are often the first to notice sudden changes in an individual's behaviour or mental state. Early recognition and timely reporting can help ensure the individual receives appropriate medical assessment and treatment, reducing the risk of complications and improving recovery.

Why This Resource Matters

Understanding delirium awareness helps care staff to:

- Recognise the early signs and symptoms of delirium.
 - Understand the difference between delirium and dementia.
 - Report sudden changes in an individual's condition promptly.
 - Support safe, person-centred care during episodes of confusion.
 - Reduce the risk of complications through early intervention.
 - Work effectively with healthcare professionals and families.
 - Improve outcomes for individuals experiencing acute illness.
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Key Message

Delirium is **not a normal part of ageing** and should always be taken seriously. By recognising sudden changes in behaviour, thinking or awareness and reporting concerns immediately, care staff play a vital role in ensuring individuals receive timely medical assessment and appropriate care.

Recognising Delirium

Delirium develops suddenly and can affect an individual's thinking, awareness, attention and behaviour. Symptoms may come and go throughout the day and can sometimes be mistaken for dementia or confusion associated with ageing. However, delirium is a medical emergency and should always be reported promptly.

Care staff are often the first to notice sudden changes because they know the individual well and can recognise when something is different.

Common signs of delirium include:

- Sudden confusion or disorientation.
- Difficulty concentrating or staying focused.
- Changes in alertness, such as becoming unusually drowsy or restless.
- Agitation, anxiety or irritability.
- Hallucinations or seeing or hearing things that are not there.
- Difficulty speaking clearly or following conversations.
- Changes in sleep patterns, particularly becoming more confused at night.
- Withdrawal, reduced communication or unusual quietness.
- Rapid changes in mood or behaviour.

These symptoms often develop over a short period and may fluctuate throughout the day.

Possible Causes of Delirium

Delirium is usually caused by an underlying medical condition or change in health. Common causes include:

- Urinary tract infections (UTIs) or other infections.
- Dehydration or poor nutrition.
- Constipation.
- Pain that is not well controlled.
- Medication changes or side effects.
- Recent surgery or hospital admission.
- Low oxygen levels or breathing difficulties.
- Acute illness or worsening long-term health conditions.

Identifying and treating the underlying cause is essential for recovery.

Remember

Delirium is **not** a normal part of ageing. Sudden confusion should always be taken seriously. By recognising changes early and reporting concerns immediately, care staff can help ensure individuals receive prompt medical assessment and treatment, reducing the risk of complications and supporting a safer recovery.

Professional Responsibilities

Every care worker has a responsibility to recognise the signs of delirium and respond appropriately. Delirium can indicate a serious underlying medical condition that requires urgent assessment and treatment. Prompt recognition, accurate observation and timely reporting can significantly improve outcomes for the individual.

As a care professional, you should always:

- Observe individuals for sudden changes in behaviour, awareness or thinking.
- Report concerns immediately to your manager or the appropriate healthcare professional.
- Record observations accurately, clearly and factually.
- Follow the individual's care plan and organisational procedures.
- Provide reassurance and communicate calmly and clearly.
- Help maintain a safe, familiar and supportive environment.
- Encourage adequate hydration and nutrition where appropriate.
- Work collaboratively with colleagues, healthcare professionals and family members to support the individual.

Care staff should **never assume that sudden confusion is simply part of ageing or dementia**. Any rapid change in mental state should be taken seriously.

When to Raise Concerns

You should seek urgent advice if an individual:

- Becomes suddenly confused or disorientated.
- Experiences rapid changes in behaviour or personality.
- Develops hallucinations or appears frightened by things that are not present.
- Becomes unusually drowsy, difficult to wake or unresponsive.
- Shows signs of infection, dehydration or acute illness alongside confusion.
- Experiences a sudden decline in communication or ability to carry out everyday activities.
- Has symptoms that fluctuate significantly over a short period.

Prompt escalation allows healthcare professionals to identify and treat the underlying cause as quickly as possible.

Good Practice Reminder

Delirium is often reversible when recognised and treated promptly. By remaining observant, responding quickly to sudden changes, recording concerns accurately and reporting them without delay, care staff play a vital role in protecting individuals, supporting recovery and delivering safe, person-centred care.

Summary

Delirium is a serious medical condition that develops suddenly and requires prompt recognition and action. It is not a normal part of ageing and is often a sign of an underlying illness, infection, dehydration or other medical problem that needs urgent assessment and treatment.

Care staff are in a unique position to notice sudden changes in an individual's behaviour, awareness or thinking. By recognising the signs early, providing reassurance, recording observations accurately and reporting concerns without delay, care staff help ensure individuals receive timely medical attention and appropriate person-centred care.

Delirium Awareness Checklist

- ✓ Recognise that delirium develops suddenly and is a medical emergency.
 - ✓ Observe for sudden changes in behaviour, awareness or thinking.
 - ✓ Report concerns immediately to your manager or healthcare professional.
 - ✓ Record observations accurately and factually.
 - ✓ Provide reassurance and communicate calmly.
 - ✓ Encourage hydration and nutrition where appropriate.
 - ✓ Help maintain a safe, familiar and supportive environment.
 - ✓ Never assume sudden confusion is simply part of ageing or dementia.
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Further Information

For further guidance on delirium, visit:

NHS – Delirium

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/delirium/>

NICE – Delirium: Prevention, Diagnosis and Management

<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg103>

Care Quality Commission (CQC)

<https://www.cqc.org.uk>

Alzheimer's Society – Delirium

<https://www.alzheimers.org.uk>

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- Resource 022 – Recognising and Responding to Pain in Care Settings – A Practical Guide for Care Staff
- Resource 034 – Recognising Deterioration in Care Settings – A Professional Awareness Guide for Care Staff
- Resource 049 – Frailty Awareness – A Practical Guide for Care Staff
- Resource 030 – Sepsis Awareness in Care Settings – A Professional Awareness Guide for Care Staff

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