

# Delirium in the Intensive Care Unit

## A Guide for Families and Caregivers

### What is delirium?

- A common medical condition caused by temporary changes in brain function.
- Occurs in approximately 1 in 4 sick children
- Although *typically* short-lived (hours to days), it is useful to know what it looks like and what you can do to best support your child support your child is useful.

### What should I look out for in my child?

**PLEASE NOTIFY A NURSE OR DOCTOR IF YOU OBSERVE ANY OF THESE SIGNS.**

- Unusual and quickly changing moods
- Difficulty understanding and speaking
- Not recognizing places, familiar people and things
- Reduced eye contact and tracking of objects and people
- Disrupted sleep patterns
- Seeing or hearing things that others do not

### Why is it important to identify if my child has delirium?

Delirium can lengthen your child's hospital stay. It can also impact mental (e.g., anxiety, depression) and physical health (e.g., fatigue, coordination) following hospital discharge.

### What are the potential causes for my child having delirium?

In most cases, delirium is likely caused by multiple factors including:

- Past condition(s) and/or current illnesses
- Type of surgery
- Reduced blood flow and oxygen throughout the body
- Severe infection, burn, or other injury
- Side effects from medication(s)
- Too much or too little sleep at irregular times
- Electrolyte imbalances (e.g. too little water intake, blood loss)

### How will my child be diagnosed and treated for delirium?

- The healthcare team will review reasons for your child's hospital stay and have a conversation with you and/or your child to assess their level of awareness and behavior
- Further testing (e.g., physical exam, body scans) may be needed to identify the underlying cause(s) for the delirium
- Depending on the results, the healthcare team can provide the needed care to improve your child's health
- It is important to remember that delirium is *temporary*, and will resolve once your healthcare team has treated the underlying condition

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## How can I best support my child when they are delirious?



Remain calm; use simple, short sentences.



Create a peaceful but engaging environment (play music, bring their favorite toys, etc.).



Continue with usual daily care routines (e.g., brushing teeth, bathing).



Remind the child where they are and who you are.



Provide in-person or online social interaction opportunities.



Encourage your child's early movement and mobility with the support of your healthcare team.



Provide noise-reducing devices (earplugs or headphones).



Be sure your child has their glasses or hearing aids.



Encourage daytime wakefulness and nighttime sleep (open/close blinds, turning lights on/off)

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## What will happen to my child after their hospital stay?

Your child may have trouble thinking, focusing, and sleeping. This can cause your child some difficulty when returning to school, work, play, or socializing. If you have any concerns, talk to your child's healthcare provider.

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## How can I be supported as a caregiver?

Observing your child in the intensive care unit can be an extremely emotional experience. Take care of yourself so that you can remain healthy while caring for your child. Below are some suggestions:

- Be kind to yourself; you are doing the best you can given the circumstance. This is not your fault or a reflection on you as a caregiver
- Speak regularly with your healthcare team about your child's health, and if you require support
- Seek help from family and close friends who are familiar with your child
- Use the online resources below to become more familiar with delirium

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## Additional resources

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1. Kelty Mental Health website
2. Vanderbilt PICU delirium overview, screening sheets, and videos
3. Vanderbilt post-intensive care syndrome overview
4. Caregiver Action Network for more information on self-care

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These resources are for educational purposes only. Please discuss any questions regarding your child's health with your healthcare team.