

Side Effects - Delirium

Delirium is a sudden change in mental status that comes and goes throughout the day. Although delirium may be mistaken for depression or dementia, these conditions are different and have different treatments.

What are signs of delirium?

- Not able to pay attention
- Confusion — most often regarding time of day, where and who you are
- Memory problems
- Agitation
- Seeing or hearing things not there
- Mood changes — such as, suddenly getting very angry, fearful or withdrawn for no reason
- Not able to sleep

Changes caused by delirium can be upsetting for family members and dangerous to the person with cancer, especially if judgment is affected. People with delirium may be more likely to fall, unable to control their bladder and/or bowels and more likely to become dehydrated. Their confused state may make it difficult to talk with others about their needs and make decisions about care.

Steps that can be taken to treat symptoms related to delirium include:

- **Treat the causes of delirium.** If medicines are causing delirium, then reduce the dose or stop them. If conditions such as dehydration, poor nutrition and infections are causing the delirium, then treating these may help.
- **Control surroundings.** If the symptoms of delirium are mild, it may help to keep the room quiet and well lit, with a clock or calendar nearby. Having family members around and keeping the same caregivers as much as possible may help. Wear eye glasses and hearing aids.
- **Consider medicines.** Medicines are sometimes given to treat the symptoms of delirium. However, these medicines have serious side effects and patients receiving them require careful observation by a doctor.

Talk with your family member's health care team

Prepare for the visit by making a list of questions to ask. Consider asking these questions:

- Is my family member at risk for delirium?
- What is causing the delirium?
- What problems should we call you about?
- What treatments are advised for my family member?
