
Understanding Confusion

Expected Changes for
the Patient Receiving
Palliative Care



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London Regional Cancer Program

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Confusion is defined as having trouble thinking, having disturbed thoughts or acting in a way that is not normal for the person. People who are dying can easily become confused. It can start because of the illness, medicine, or a sudden change in the person's environment. For the ill patient, confusion can begin either quickly or slowly. Confusion can cause worry for both the family and the patient. Learning more about confusion can help reduce this worry.

What do I need to know?

Delirium is the medical term for confusion. Delirium happens a lot in the last few weeks of life. While the chances of confusion increase at the end of life, it is not certain that it will occur.

Delirium usually begins with a change in mood and behaviour for the person. Some common symptoms a person may feel, include:

- Agitation and feeling restless;
- Anxiety;
- Irritation;
- Anger.

Sometimes the person may start seeing and hearing things that are not real (hallucinations). They may have disturbed thoughts or trouble thinking, and will not be able to focus or make decisions.

It is important to know that just because a person shows a few symptoms, does not mean they have true confusion. It is necessary to really listen to the person to determine whether or not confusion exists.

Is there anything I can do to help?

The best way to help your loved one is to provide them with comfort and patience during their illness. Sometimes, you can help reduce a loved one's confusion by:

- Reminding the person of who you are and how you know them.
- Not testing your loved one on things you think they should know. This may frustrate or make the person angry.
- Turning off the radio or TV when talking to the person.
- Talking slowly and standing close to the person.
- Reminding them about the world around them. Keep a calendar and a clock in the room to show them what day and time it is.

Can confusion be treated?

Some symptoms for confusion can be treated, while others cannot. In some cases, medicine can help lessen the delirium. However, medications do not always work and they can have different effects on different people.

In other cases, complementary therapies like acupuncture and music therapy can reduce tension in the ill person, which helps reduce confusion.

Please remember that you can talk to the Palliative Care Team about the symptoms of delirium and keeping your loved one comfortable. They are there to support you as you adjust to these symptoms.

To learn more about confusion, please contact one of the following:

Palliative Care Program, London Regional Cancer Program at 519-685-8500 ext 53257.

Southwest Community Care Access Centre's Head Office at 1-800-811-5146, TTY 1-800-811-5147.

Supportive Care, London Regional Cancer Program at 519-685-8622.
