

Ideas for older people to help prevent delirium

It's a good idea to look after your brain. Here's how you can do it.

Delirium is a sudden and severe temporary disturbance in thinking and brain function. It is caused by a stress on the brain. It is a common and serious condition.

It can cause changes in a person's ability to stay alert, to remember, to know where they are or the time of day, or to talk or think clearly. The person seems much more confused than usual.

Delirium becomes more common as we get older, especially if we are unwell, frail, or living with dementia.

If delirium is spotted, the underlying causes can be treated to help resolve the delirium. The delirium will usually only last for a few days.

If it is missed the delirium can continue and lead to serious complications such as falls.

Delirium can often be prevented or treated by simple things that work on the factors that may cause a delirium.

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Reducing risk **factors** can help prevent **delirium**

Some of the risk factors for delirium we are not able to change, including being older, being very unwell, and having dementia. There are many risk factors that we can change however. These include:

- Reducing pain
- Staying engaged
- Reducing infection
- Supporting our vision and hearing
- Nutrition
- Reducing stress
- Reducing constipation
- Keeping well hydrated
- Reviewing medication
- Sleep
- Exercise



6 Proven ways to help prevent delirium

Delirium is preventable

Use these strategies to help prevent delirium

1 **Stimulating the mind**

Try daily conversations, reading, listening to music, games and puzzles, and other activities.

2 **Moving**

Be physically active at least 3 times a day.

3 **Sleeping well**

Use techniques to promote relaxation and sufficient sleep.

4 **Seeing and hearing**

Ensure hearing aids and glasses are clean, working and used if they are needed.

5 **Staying hydrated**

Ensure plenty of fluids throughout the day to avoid dehydration.

6 **Eating**

Ensure nutritious food is available throughout the day. 'Graze' little and often if main meals are difficult

Spotting delirium if it develops

It is hard to spot delirium in yourself. It helps if the people who know us best learn about delirium. Ask them to help you talk to a doctor or nurse right away if any of the following signs suddenly appear – even if the signs come and go.

- Having trouble paying attention.
- Being distracted or unable to follow a conversation.
- Saying or doing things that do not make sense.
- Hearing voices or seeing things that other people do not.
- Developing strange beliefs or thinking people are trying to cause you harm.
- Being withdrawn, quieter or slower than usual.
- Being restless, worried, annoyed or angry.
- Having trouble staying awake during the day and/or not sleeping at night.

There is a great brochure with more information just for family and friends who know us well. It is called "Understanding and preventing delirium in older people: Tips for family, whānau, and friends". It is available online (see below for the website).

Te Whatu Ora
Health New Zealand
Waitaha Canterbury

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best for people, best for system

This booklet was developed within the CDHB with the support of the South Island Alliance. A version is available to download from
https://healthify.nz/health-a-z/d/delirium/

We gratefully acknowledge material from the following sources:

RGP of Toronto. (2018). SF7 Toolkit. Available from https://www.rgptoronto.ca/resources/

Canadian Coalition for Seniors' Mental Health. (2016). Delirium Prevention and care with older adults. Available from https://ccsmh.ca/projects/delirium/

CDHB THINKdelirium. Available from http://edu.cdhb.health.nz/Hospitals-Services/Health-Professionals/think-delirium/Pages/default.aspx