

Understanding delirium in children during/after hospital care

Paediatric Intensive Care Unit

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Information for Patients and Carers

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What is delirium?

This leaflet will explain what delirium is, how it can be spotted and managed.

Children and babies who are very unwell, or who have had an operation may develop “critical care delirium”. This is a state of confusion. This can happen suddenly or over a number of days. This can be during your child’s illness or recovery period. It can be very alarming and frightening for you to see.

Parents or carers are sometimes the first to notice this. They often say “they don’t seem like my child”. Spotting and knowing about delirium helps us support your child in the best way possible, until the delirium ends.

What causes delirium?

There are many factors that cause delirium. In most cases there is no single reason or cause. Delirium happens because of a complex mix of:

- an unwell child,
- the place in which they are being treated,
- the treatments and medications that they have.

**Health information and support is available at www.nhs.uk
or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice**

Visit www.uhleicester.nhs.uk for maps and information about visiting Leicester’s Hospitals
To give feedback about this information sheet, contact uhl-tr.informationforpatientsmailbox@nhs.net

How common is delirium?

We are not sure. Research shows it happens in anywhere from 1 in 10 unwell children. This can go up to 7 in 10 critically unwell children in intensive care.

It happens more if they have needed sedation for more than 1 day.

All patients in intensive care should have their sedation levels checked regularly. A healthcare professional should screen the patient for delirium 2 times a day.

How long does delirium last?

Your child could have delirium from a couple of hours to a number of days. Delirium is temporary. Your child will not stay this way forever.

Possible signs of delirium

What you might notice:

- Your child moving a lot, being hard to settle, being restless.
- They may not be as clear-headed as usual. As if everything just passes them by and it can be difficult to speak with them. They may not know where they are.
- Your child may not recall things they have just been told. This can be things like why they are in hospital. They may not realise that they are not remembering things.
- Your child could become watchful or suspicious, sometimes even aggressive. Or they might withdraw and become less responsive.
- Not recognising those around them, even their parents.
- Seeing or hearing things that are not there (hallucinations) or mistaking normal noises. They may think that a machine beeping means it could be a bomb or explosion.
- Your child's behaviour might change often, and sometimes symptoms can be worse at night.

Looking after families

We know it is hard for people to see their child upset and not like their usual self. It is important to remember that this is not permanent. Children often pick up on their carers' worries. It is important that you look after your self. It is ok to leave the hospital, go somewhere else and even enjoy yourself. This does not mean you do not care about your child. It is important for you to take time out to keep your own strength up.

We recommend:

- Take breaks. Go for a walk outside, rest in your room, or go home for a while.
- If you worry about leaving your child, speak to one of the nurses to see if a member of staff can stay with your child. Or ask a family member or friend to be there.
- Speak with a friend or family member who supports you.
- Eat regular meals and try to get at least a few hours of rest every day.
- Remember, people outside the hospital often want to help.
- Ask to speak with someone who supports families in hospital like chaplaincy.
- Call a support line such as Samaritans on **116 123**.

What to do if you notice symptoms of delirium

While you are in hospital, you can speak with any health worker if you worry that your child might have delirium. They will check your child and let you know what they have found.

After intensive care

We know that children who have been in hospital very unwell may continue to have strange or patchy memories of their time there, specially if they had delirium. Children may need reassurance that we would not expect them to remember all their time in hospital, or what led to them being in hospital. Many children have strange dreams but feel embarrassed about it. It is useful to tell children that this might happen so that they do not worry about it and can talk about it if they want to.

Speak to your GP about having your child referred for support if your child is complaining of symptoms. Speak to your GP if you are worried about your child. Children may have nightmares about strange experiences while in hospital or go back to behaviour they had grown out of before hospital.

Contact details

If you have questions about the contents of this leaflet, please ring the Paediatric Intensive Care Unit on **0116 258 3334** or **0116 258 6844**, or speak to your child's medical team.

