

A better way to care

Safe and high-quality care for patients with cognitive impairment (dementia and delirium) in hospital



Actions for consumers

A better way to care: Safe and high-quality care for patients with cognitive impairment (dementia and delirium) in hospital

Introduction

Any person going to hospital can find the experience stressful. For a person with cognitive impairment – who may be having difficulties with their memory, thinking or communicating – the experience can be overwhelming.

A patient with cognitive impairment will need extra care and supervision to stay safe during their hospital stay.

The Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care has put together information for hospitals on how to improve care for people with cognitive impairment. This information is based on research evidence, examples of good practice from hospitals in Australia and overseas, and feedback from patients, carers, families and clinicians. Clinicians are trained health professionals such as doctors, nurses, occupational therapists and social workers.

Hospitals should aim to:

- ✓ make sure that everyone working in the hospital is aware of dementia and delirium, the possible harm that can occur if the right care is not provided, and how they can help to prevent delirium
- ✓ recognise when a patient has cognitive impairment and find out what is causing it
- ✓ work with patients, carers and families to provide safe and high-quality care for people with cognitive impairment.

Information provided in this resource outlines key actions for patients, carers and families.

This resource has been designed to be viewed either in print or electronically. [The electronic resource^v](#) provides links to external web sites and will be updated as required.

People with **cognitive impairment** have difficulties with memory, thinking or communicating. These difficulties can be temporary or long term. For older people who are in hospital, **dementia** and **delirium** are common causes of cognitive impairment.

Delirium is an acute medical condition that occurs suddenly and may only last a short time.

A person may feel confused and disorientated, and may be unable to pay attention. Carers and families will usually report that the person is not their normal self.

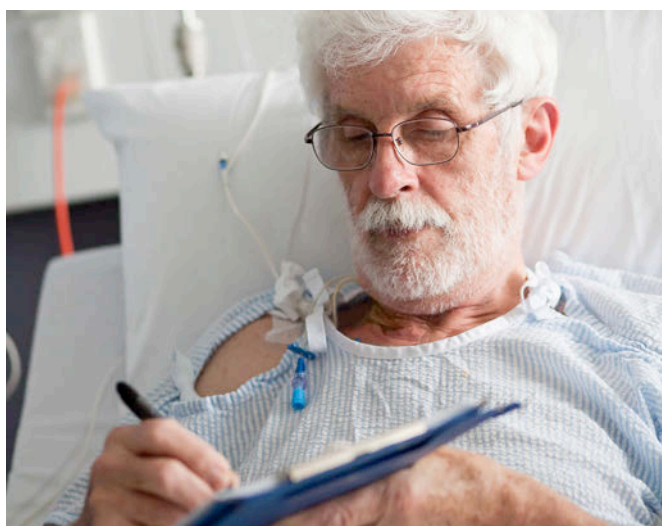
Delirium may be caused by many different things, including a severe infection, lack of fluids and/or reactions to medicines. Delirium can have serious consequences if not identified, but can be reversed if the causes are found and treated.

Dementia is a collective term for a number of disorders that cause decline in a person's memory, judgement or language that affects everyday functioning. Dementia is different from delirium because the decline is gradual, progressive and usually irreversible. The most common type is Alzheimer's disease.

A person living with dementia is more likely to develop delirium during their hospital stay than someone without dementia.

What can I do if I have cognitive impairment and I am in hospital?

- ✓ Let clinicians know if you are experiencing any changes in your memory or thinking, particularly if you feel that it has happened recently.
- ✓ You may be asked questions to test your memory and to obtain background information about your health. These questions will help the clinician to determine if there is a need for further investigation, and to make decisions about your care and treatment.
- ✓ While you are in hospital, let your clinician know what assistance you may need.
- ✓ Participate in discussions and decisions about your health condition and possible treatment as much as you are able and choose to. Ask that your carer or a family member also be involved, if that is what you want.
- ✓ Let clinicians know what is important to you, if you have any treatment preferences or if you have completed an advance care plan.
- ✓ If you are unable to make your own healthcare decisions, your clinician will find out who is able to make decisions on your behalf and will consult them. This person is called your substitute decision-maker.
- ✓ If you don't have a carer or a family member who is able to visit you, you may wish to nominate someone whom your clinician can contact to inform them of your hospital admission.



What can I do if I am a carer or family member of a patient with cognitive impairment?

- ✓ Let clinicians know if you have any concerns about the memory, thinking or behaviour of the person you care for. Also let the clinician know if the person has been diagnosed with dementia.
- ✓ If possible, keep an up-to-date list of all prescription and nonprescription medicines and the dosages of these medicines that the person you care for is taking, and bring all medicines to hospital.
- ✓ Let the clinician know if the person you care for is not their normal self on admission or at any time during their hospital stay. The person may have developed delirium.
- ✓ If the person you care for is not able to, tell the clinician if you know their healthcare preferences or if the patient has documented their wishes in an advance care plan.
- ✓ If the person you care for is not able to, inform the clinician if the person has appointed someone to make decisions on their behalf or if they have an order of a tribunal.
- ✓ Let clinicians know about the person you care for, in particular their routine and how they can be comforted if they are distressed in your absence.
- ✓ Assist in the care of the patient if you choose to. Clinicians may encourage you to bring in familiar objects and activities for the person you care for, because this will help prevent delirium.





Resources

Where do I go for more information?

[Going to hospitalⁱ](#) is a help sheet by Alzheimer's Australia that provides information on going to hospital.

[Alzheimer's Australiaⁱⁱ](#) also provides dementia help sheets for people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds on their web site.

[Start2talkⁱⁱⁱ](#) is a web site that explains the process of documenting your wishes for your medical treatment, and the legislation that guides doctors about who they will ask if the patient is unable to give consent.

[My Aged Care^{iv}](#) is a web site that provides information on aged care services. Information is also available by calling **1800 200 422**.

[A better way to care: Safe and high-quality care for patients with cognitive impairment \(dementia and delirium\) in hospital – Actions for health service managers, Actions for clinicians and Actions for consumers^v](#) are three resources published by the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care that provide information for health service managers, clinicians and consumers on how to improve care for people with cognitive impairment.

Links to more information

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| i. www.fightdementia.org.au/common/files/NAT/20130912_NAT_HS_CaringForSomeoneHelpSheet_10.pdf | iv. www.myagedcare.gov.au/ |
| ii. www.fightdementia.org.au/ | v. www.safetyandquality.gov.au/our-work/cognitive-impairment/cognitive-impairment-resources |
| iii. www.start2talk.org.au/ | |

Acknowledgements

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