What is delirium?
The word “delirium” is used to describe a severe state of confusion. People with delirium:
- cannot think clearly
- have trouble paying attention
- have a hard time understanding what is going on around them
- may see or hear things that are not there. These things seem very real to them.

Delirium is common
- About two out of three patients in ICUs get delirium.
- Seven out of 10 patients get delirium while they are on a breathing machine or soon after.
- About one out of three elderly patients in the hospital get delirium.

Causes of delirium
Experts think delirium is caused by a change in the way the brain is working. This can be caused by:
- less oxygen to the brain
- the brain’s inability to use oxygen
- chemical changes in the brain
- certain medicines
- infections
- severe pain
- medical illnesses
- alcohol, sedatives or pain killers
- withdrawal from alcohol or nicotine
Signs of delirium
A person with delirium may
- appear agitated or even quiet
- be confused
- be aggressive
- use inappropriate words
- not be able to pay attention or follow directions
- be unsure about where they are
- be unsure about the time of day
- see things that are not there
- act different from usual
- have changes in sleeping habits
- have emotional changes
- have movements that are not normal, like tremors or picking at clothes
- have memory problems

Delirium is different from dementia.

DELIRIUM
- Delirium comes on quickly, in hours or days. Signs of delirium can change from one day to the next.
- Delirium can make memory and thinking problems worse.
- Delirium usually clears up after a few days or even a week.

DEMENTIA
- Usually dementia is a permanent condition.
- Dementia is a disturbance of thinking. It comes on over months or even years.
- Patients with dementia are more likely to develop delirium.
How you can help?

- Speak softly and use simple words or phrases.
- Remind the patient of the day and date.
- Talk about family and friends.
- Bring glasses, hearing aids.
- Decorate the room with calendars, posters or family pictures. These familiar items might be reminders of home.
- Provide the patient with favorite music or TV shows.
- If your loved one has delirium, we might ask you to sit and help calm them.