Delirium

Delirium is the main cause of unplanned hospital admissions for people with dementia or memory issues. It can lead to deterioration of the individual's physical and mental health; the ability to carry out activities of daily living; longer admission to hospital; increased chance of admission to long term care and death. Anyone over the age of 65 with previous brain disease or brain injury is potentially at risk of delirium.

What is delirium?

A sudden or severe change over a short period of time. The person may appear sleepy, confused, disorientated, flushed, not eating or drinking, have a raised temperature, or seeing or hearing things which are not there. Dementia does not change rapidly over a short period of time, so any sudden changes will usually be due to something else.

What causes these changes?

Urinary Tract Infection (UTI)

If you see any signs of dark urine or blood evident, have an offensive smell, particularly a 'fishy' smell, are visiting the toilet more frequently, experience episodes of incontinence when this is unusual, or complain of burning on urinating - these could indicate a UTI.

If the urine has a blue/green colour, act quickly as this is pseudomonas which is a very nasty infection and can be life threatening.

Chest Infection

Symptoms could be drowsiness, confusion, or hallucinations, but there will also be a cough which may show yellow or green rubbish. The cough sounds very chesty, breathless or rattles when breathing, on exertion or at night when lying in bed.

Constipation

If someone becomes very constipated, toxins will start to circulate around the body causing confusion, drowsiness, and not eating or drinking properly. A regular well-balanced diet with fruit, vegetables and roughage can help to maintain a regular pattern but speak to your GP if this problem continues.

Remember you know your loved one better than anyone else and can spot signs of 'something' different in them, trust your instinct and talk to your GP if you feel things have changed - especially if this is rapid, over just a few hours. You may not know exactly what the problem is, but you know something is wrong.

Keele University

Approach Dementia Support