COLLABORATIVE REGIONAL BENCHMARKING GROUP

Delirium in critical care

Aim Provide guidance on detection and management of delirium in critical care.
Scope All adult patients in critical care.

ASSESS FOR DELIRIUM

Assess and document:

- Use a validated critical care delirium tool
- Screen at least daily
- Repeat assessment with changes or fluctuations in behaviour
- Assess sedation level at least 4-hourly
- Assess pain at least 4-hourly

SUPPORT & PREVENT

- Promote good sleep patterns
- Minimise light and noise
- Mobilise early, including range-of-movement exercises
- Reorientate frequently and provide communication aids
- Engage and empower patients and families
- Review medication, nutrition and hydration daily

STANDARD CARE FOR DELIRIUM PREVENTION AND MANAGEMENT

1	Daily screening for evidence of delirium using a validated method[2].
2	Assess sedation level at least 4-hourly using the Richmond Agitation-Sedation Scale or Riker Sedation-Agitation Scale[3].
3	Assess pain at least 4-hourly and manage as per local protocol[2].
4	Promote good sleep patterns, minimising light and noise[3].
5	Encourage early mobilisation, including a range of exercises for people with limited mobility[2].
6	Engage and empower patients and families, providing information[1].
7	Reorient the patient frequently and provide communication aids[3].
8	Review medication, nutrition and hydration status daily[2].

CONSIDER AND/OR TREAT

- Daily sedation hold / spontaneous breathing trial
- Withdrawal from:
  - alcohol
  - nicotine
  - benzodiazepines

TREATMENT OF DELIRIUM: THINK

T Toxic situations: shock, dehydration, new organ failure, sedatives
H Hypoxaemia
I Infection and immobility
N Non-pharmacological measures: hearing aids, glasses, sleep protocols, clocks, radio, TV and noise control
K Correct electrolyte abnormalities

See your unit's full guidelines for more information.

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References

1 Intensive Care Society and Faculty of Intensive Care Medicine Joint Standards Committee (2026). Guideline for the Provision of Intensive Care Services (GPICS), Version 3.

2 NICE (2010, updated 2023). CG103 Delirium: prevention, diagnosis and management in hospital and long-term care.

3 Intensive Care Society (2025). Guidance for Delirium in the Critically Ill Patient.