

# Post Operative Confusion

## Information for Patients and their Families



# What is post operative confusion?

After heart surgery, people can experience a level of confusion, particularly while they are in intensive care. This happens for up to 50% of patients having heart surgery.

Confusion after heart surgery can include:

- finding it hard to pay attention to things
- disorganised thinking
- an altered level of consciousness
- disorientation
- memory impairment
- seeing or hearing things differently
- feeling slowed down
- feeling wound up or agitated
- having disturbed sleep.

Postoperative confusion often starts a couple of days after surgery and usually lasts a short number of days or even just hours. It varies from one person to another in how it presents, but it is usually worse at night.

Confusion is caused by a number of factors, including reactions to medication, stresses of surgery on the body, complications from medical procedures, sleep deprivation and the body staying still for so long. It is more common in older patients and in those with several medical conditions. Factors that may prolong confusion include taking a high number of medications, infections, dehydration, poor eating, the use of bladder catheters, multiple room changes and the absence of clocks, reading glasses or hearing aids.

# How patients might feel or behave

During this period of confusion, people can experience a range of unpleasant emotions and thoughts. These include paranoia and a strong sense of fear that others are trying to harm them. Other people can just feel peculiar and "unreal". Some patients feel very confused and under threat. Some report having hallucinations and seeing or hearing things that others did not.

These strong emotions and experiences can lead to a range of behaviours. Some people can withdraw, appearing quiet, less responsive and not themselves. Others can become agitated or abusive and say and do things they would not normally; for example swearing at others, lashing out, being uncooperative toward staff and trying to remove medical equipment. These experiences can be very frightening and distressing for patients and their relatives.

## **Please remember:**

**Our ward staff are used to dealing with a wide range of reactions to surgery and understand that these episodes of confusion can occur following surgery. They would in no way blame you for the behaviour or see it as a sign of your character, and they would not think badly of you at all.**

# Raising concerns:

Signs of post-operative confusion are not always obvious to those caring for you and can be easily missed.

## **While on the ward:**

If you notice that you are having any of the experiences detailed in this leaflet, please do not hesitate to mention them to a member of staff on the ward. Your family or other visitors may also do this on your behalf. Remember that ward staff are used to helping patients cope with such experiences and would want to be able to help you.

## **When you get home:**

If you have any concerns about symptoms of confusion in the weeks after being discharged from hospital or become confused after being discharged, you should either:

1. Discuss these with your GP, or
2. Contact the Cardiac Rehabilitation Team on 01253 655326, who would be happy to discuss your concerns with you.

# What helps?

- Speak to the ward staff and let them know you or your loved one is having these symptoms so that they can assess how to help and support them. Medication may be prescribed to try to calm the patient, which will aid normal recovery and aims to keep them safe.
- Patients will often ask to speak to their families when they are upset. Families can help by reassuring their loved one that they are safe and that they are experiencing some confusion from surgery.
- Providing clues to orient patients between day and night helps. For example, ensuring they can see a clock and are wearing their glasses or hearing aid during the day. Turning off the lights at night and providing earplugs if the ward is noisy can also be helpful.
- Patients have found it helpful for their families to keep a brief diary of what happened to them while they were in hospital, in a logical sequence of events. This can help the patient to piece together their memories of their time in hospital once they return home.
- It can help to talk about your time in hospital with those close to you.

Leaflet developed by Dr Susanne White, Clinical Psychologist, Dr Joanne Sanderson, Clinical Psychologist, & Dr Helen Saunders, Consultant Anaesthetist

## Options available

If you'd like a large print, audio, Braille or a translated version of this leaflet then please call **01253 655588**.

## Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

Do you need information or advice about NHS services? Do you have concerns about you or your family's healthcare or are seeking a resolution to a problem and cannot get an answer to your questions? PALS is here to listen and support you in whatever way they can to ensure your experience of healthcare services is a positive one.

Tel: **01253 655588** email: **pals@bfwh.nhs.uk**

You can also write to us at:

**PALS, Blackpool Victoria Hospital,  
Whinney Heys Road, Blackpool FY3 8NR**

Further information is available on our website:

**www.bfwh.nhs.uk**

## Travelling to our hospitals

**For the best way to plan your journey to any of the Fylde's hospitals visit our travel website:**

**www.bfwhospitals.nhs.uk/departments/travel/**

## Useful contact details

Switchboard: **01253 300000/**

## References

This booklet is evidence based wherever the appropriate evidence is available, and represents an accumulation of expert opinion and professional interpretation.

Details of the references used in writing this booklet are available on request from:

**Policy Co-ordinator/Archivist  
01253 303397**



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