



HOT TIP
January 2025

Northern Health Palliative Care

Assessing for Delirium using the CAM Tool

Delirium is a syndrome of abrupt onset and fluctuating disturbance in attention and awareness that is a decline from baseline status. It is typified by cognitive dysfunction along with changes in psychomotor behaviour, mood, and sleep-wake cycle. Risk factors for delirium include age over 65 years, dementia, visual or hearing impairment, immobility, functional dependence, malnutrition, substance use, multiple chronic co-morbidities, multiple medications, and admission to hospital.

Initiate the [Confusion Assessment Method Tool](#) for patients who are identified as high risk (3 or more risk factors) or are showing unexplained behaviors.

<u>Acute Onset and Fluctuating Course</u>		
a) Is there evidence of an acute change in mental status from the person's baseline?	<input type="checkbox"/> No	Box 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Yes
b) Did the (abnormal) behaviour fluctuate during the day? That is, did it tend to come and go or increase and decrease in severity?	<input type="checkbox"/> No	
<u>Inattention</u>		
Did the person have difficulty focusing attention? For example, were they easily distracted or having difficulty keeping track of what was being said?	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
<u>Disorganized Thinking</u>		
Was the person's thinking disorganized or incoherent (rambling or irrelevant conversation)? Was it unclear or the flow of ideas illogical or unpredictably switching from subject to subject?	<input type="checkbox"/> No	Box 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Yes
<u>Altered Level of Consciousness</u>		
Overall, how would you rate the person's level of consciousness?		
<input type="checkbox"/> Alert (normal) <input type="checkbox"/> Vigilant (hyper-alert) <input type="checkbox"/> Lethargic (drowsy, easily aroused) <input type="checkbox"/> Stupor (difficult to arouse) <input type="checkbox"/> Coma (can't arouse)		
Do any check appear in this box?		<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes

If all items in Box 1 are checked and at least one item in Box 2 is checked, a diagnosis of delirium is suggested. The CAM tool is not diagnostic, and a clinical assessment should be completed.

References:

B.C. Inter-professional Palliative Symptom Management Guidelines, December 2017