Confusion

What is confusion?
Confusion is a problem with not being able to think clearly and can involve problems with how you:
• Perceive the world around you
• Pay attention
• Remember things
• Sleep and when you wake
• Coordinate physical activity, like throwing a ball, driving a car, or typing
These problems can be severe and may last for a long time. Sometimes confusion can lead to feeling disoriented and can even become a serious disorder called delirium [dih-LEER-ee-uh m], which involves being agitated, restless, experiencing illusions, and thinking and speaking in a disjointed way.

What are the symptoms?
Symptoms may include:
• Inability to think quickly and clearly
• Difficulty focusing attention and making decisions
• Feeling disoriented or having no idea anything is wrong
• Becoming verbally aggressive or physically violent
Depending on the cause, confusion may begin quickly or develop slowly over many months.

What causes confusion?
Confusion can be caused by alcohol use, drug use or drug withdrawal, acute illness (such as hypoglycemia, low blood oxygen, or infection), mental illness, a disease of the brain, or a head injury.

What are the risk factors?
People who have the following medical conditions or treatments can have problems with confusion:
• Fluid and electrolyte [ih-LEK-truh-lahyt] imbalances — Too many or too few important minerals in your body, such as calcium, potassium, or sodium
• Nutritional problems — Can lead to fluid and electrolyte imbalances
• Cardiovascular (heart and blood vessel) disturbances — Causes decreased blood flow and oxygen to the brain
• Respiratory (lung) disorders — Causes a build up of carbon dioxide and decreased oxygen
• Metabolic and endocrine disorders (how your body converts energy and regulates various functions) — Causes toxin or chemical build up
• Infection (germs) or sepsis (blood poisoning) — Causes a toxin build up in the body
• Surgery or anesthesia — Introduces chemicals into the body
• Substance use disorder — Causes chemical intoxication from drugs and changes in how the body responds to those drugs

How is confusion diagnosed?
Your physician will examine you and run tests for possible causes of the confusion, especially to determine if there is a more serious cause, such as stroke or heart attack. These tests might involve blood tests or imaging such as x-rays or CT scans. Your provider might also conduct neurological [n00 t-uh-L0J-i-kuhl] tests that evaluate your memory, thought processes, pupils, reflexes, nerve function, and muscle strength.
How is confusion treated?

Treatment of confusion depends on the cause, and treating the cause may involve medicines or procedures. For example, if undiagnosed diabetes is causing the confusion, getting your blood sugar in balance may resolve the confusion. Key treatment considerations include:

- **A confused person should not be left alone.** Try to keep the surroundings calm, quiet, and peaceful to reduce safety complications.

- **Keep hazardous objects and materials away.** Alcohol, sedatives, and antihistamines may make the symptoms worse and should be avoided. Tell your doctor about all medicines you take including over-the-counter medicines, supplements, inhalers, liquid medicines, and patches.

**When should I call my doctor?**

Call your doctor or go to an emergency room if you experience:
- A sudden change in mental function
- An inability to move an arm or leg
- An inability to speak
- Fever
- Any other significant change in behavior or thinking

If confusion lasts, it may help to use orientation strategies, such as:
- Have a clock and calendar within visual range
- Keep a consistent schedule
- Encourage decision making when appropriate

**Questions for my doctor**

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