

# Confusion

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## 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-uhm], 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** [noo r-uh-LOJ-i-kuh] tests that evaluate your memory, thought processes, pupils, reflexes, nerve function, and muscle strength.

