



Altered Mental Status

An altered mental status is a change in a person's ability to function cognitively, meaning that they may have difficulty understanding what they are thinking, feeling, and experiencing. It indicates a change in the level of consciousness, the state of awareness and wakefulness. They may appear to be confused, drowsy and lethargic, or may not respond to stimulation at all. An altered mental status can happen suddenly or have a slightly more gradual onset.

With an altered mental status, you may see delirium that develops over the course of a few hours to a few days. Your loved one may experience difficulty remembering things, speaking, and may have changes to how they perceive the environment and people around them. They may appear to be overly tired and inactive, or they may become restless and agitated. They may also appear to be depressed, confused, anxious, agitated, paranoid, restless, or angry.

Factors that may contribute to an altered mental status change include

- Pain
- Constipation
- Sleep deprivation
- Dehydration
- The inability to fully empty the bladder
- Low oxygen levels
- Medication side effects
- Underlying infection
- Withdrawal from benzodiazepines, alcohol, tobacco, or opioids,
- Existential suffering, and
- A stroke or transient ischemic attack.

If your loved one is experiencing an altered mental status change, you will want to create a calm environment with

- Soft lights,
- Quiet sounds
- Familiar surroundings
- People, and things, and
- You will want to minimize the amount of people and things in the room so as to not cause overstimulation of your loved one's senses.
- Be sure to use a quiet presence and have minimal conversation.

If you are able to, investigate the concerns that your loved one is expressing. You can attempt to use relaxation techniques such as

- Slow breathing
- Palm to palm hand holding, or
- Massage if they are able to tolerate touch.

You may consider using

- A weighted blanket
- A busy pillow, or
- Lavender scent.

You will also want to call the 24-hour number so that a nurse may assess your loved one and collaborate with a physician regarding medication or other interventions that may treat the symptoms.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to call the 24-hour number, 877-506-0149.