

Altered Level of Consciousness

KEY POINTS

- Altered level of consciousness (ALOC) means that you are not as awake, alert, or able to understand or react as you would normally. It can happen suddenly or over time.
 - You will need to stay in the hospital for testing and treatment. Treatment depends on the cause. For example, changing medicines or treating a medical problem may help the ALOC get better.
 - To keep you safe, you may need help with personal care and meals for a time, and you may need support from family, friends, and healthcare providers.
-

What is altered level of consciousness?

Altered level of consciousness (ALOC) means that you are not as awake, alert, or able to understand or react as you would normally. It can happen suddenly or over time. Different levels of ALOC include:

- Lethargy, which means you are drowsy and less aware or less interested in your surroundings. You can usually talk and follow directions when you are awake.
- Confusion, which means you are easily distracted and may be slow to respond. You may not know who or where you are or the time of day or year.
- Delirium, which means you may have severe confusion and may not know the time, date, where you are, who you are, or who the people around you are. You may see or hear things that are not there and be agitated or have lethargy.
- Stupor, which means you are in a deep sleep unless something loud or painful wakes you up. You may not be able to talk or follow directions well. You fall back to sleep very quickly.
- Coma, which is a state of deep unconsciousness. You cannot be awakened. You can't speak, move on purpose, or respond to loud noises, touch, or shaking.

What is the cause?

Many things can cause ALOC. Common causes include:

- Conditions that affect the brain such as stroke, infections, dementia, and head injuries
- Infections such as pneumonia or urinary tract infections
- Problems with dehydration, a very low or very high blood glucose level, or a very low or very high temperature (hypothermia or fever)
- Lack of oxygen to the brain that may happen with severe blood loss, very low blood pressure, severe lung disease, carbon monoxide poisoning, or if the heart stops beating for too long

- Alcohol, prescription or nonprescription drugs, or other toxic substances such as poison

Other things can cause ALOC, but they are less common:

- Severe imbalance of chemicals in the body such as with liver, kidney, or thyroid disease
- Psychiatric problems

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms will vary based on what is causing the ALOC. You may have:

- Confusion
- Extreme tiredness or drowsiness
- Not being able to respond to people or to what's going on around you
- Unusual behavior
- Restlessness or irritability
- Slurred or rambling speech
- Trouble moving, loss of balance, or weakness on one side of your body
- Hallucinations
- Seizures
- Coma

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and medical history, including medicines you are taking. Your provider will check for a medical illness or drug or alcohol problem that could cause the symptoms. It may be necessary to have family members help describe any events that happened before the ALOC.

Tests may include:

- Blood tests
- Urine tests
- Chest X-ray to check a lung infection
- CT scan, which uses X-rays and a computer to show detailed pictures of the brain
- MRI, which uses a strong magnetic field and radio waves to show detailed pictures of the brain
- Lumbar puncture, also called a spinal tap, which uses a needle to get a sample of fluid from the area around the spinal cord
- EEG (electroencephalogram), which uses small wires pasted or taped to your head to measure and record the electrical activity of your brain

Your provider may also ask some questions to test memory and thinking such as:

- Asking where you are, the date, and the time
- Asking why you are here
- Asking you to describe current events in the news or in your own life

Your provider may check with family, friends, and hospital staff to see if things you've said are true or imagined.

How is it treated?

If you have an episode of ALOC, you need to be carefully watched, especially in the first 24 hours. You will need to stay in the hospital for testing and treatment. Treatment depends on the cause. For example, changing medicines or treating a medical problem may help the ALOC get better.

Treatment may include:

- IV fluids to treat dehydration and a chemical imbalance
- Antibiotic medicine to treat infection
- Medicine to treat blood glucose that is too high or low
- Oxygen
- A tube in your throat and a machine to help you breathe and get enough oxygen, and to prevent choking
- Medicine to reduce swelling in and around your brain

Treatment may also include:

- Keeping you safe from harm, which may mean someone always being with you, or in rare cases using restraints
- Help with personal care and meals for a time
- Calm and quiet surroundings
- Support from family, friends, and healthcare providers to help orient and calm you

How can I take care of myself?

Follow the full course of treatment prescribed by your healthcare provider. Ask your provider:

- How and when you will get your test results
- How long it will take to recover
- If there are activities you should avoid and when you can return to normal activities
- How to take care of yourself at home
- What symptoms or problems you should watch for and what to do if you have them

Make sure you know when you should come back for a checkup. Keep all appointments for provider visits or tests.

This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.

Developed by Change Healthcare.

Published by Change Healthcare.

Produced in Cork, Ireland.