Confusion

Confusion is the inability to think with your usual speed or clarity. Confusion may come on quickly or slowly over time. How quickly the confusion comes on depends on the cause. Confusion can be due to any number of causes.

CAUSES

- Concussion, head injury, or head trauma.
- Seizures.
- Stroke.
- Fever.
- Senility.
- Heightened emotional states like rage or terror.
- Mental illness in which the person loses the ability to determine what is real and what is not (*hallucinations*).
- Infections.
- Toxic effects from alcohol, drugs, or prescription medicines.
- Dehydration and an imbalance of salts in the body (*electrolytes*).
- Lack of sleep.
- Low blood sugar (*diabetes*).
- Low levels of oxygen (for example from chronic lung disorders).
- Drug interactions or other medication side effects.
- Nutritional deficiencies, especially niacin, thiamine, vitamin C, or vitamin B.
- Sudden drop in body temperature (*hypothermia*).
- Illness in the elderly. Constipation can result in confusion. An elderly person who is hospitalized may become confused due to change in daily routine.

SYMPTOMS

People often describe their thinking as cloudy or unclear when they are confused. Confusion can also include feeling disoriented. That means you are unaware of:

- Where or who you are.
- What the date or time is.

If confused, you may also have difficulty paying attention, remembering and making decisions. Some people also act aggressively when they are confused.

DIAGNOSIS

The medical evaluation of confusion may include:

- Blood and urine tests.
- X-rays.
- Brain and nervous system tests.
- Analyzing your brain waves (*electroencphalogram* or *EEG*).
- A special X-ray (*MRI*) of your head or other special studies.

Your physician will ask questions such as:

- Do you get days and nights mixed up?
- Are you awake during regular sleep times?
- Do you have trouble recognizing people?
- Do you know where you are?
- Do you know the date and time?
- Does the confusion come and go?
- Is the confusion quickly getting worse?

- Has there been a recent illness?
- Has there been a recent head injury?
- Are you diabetic?
- Do you have a lung disorder?
- What medication are you taking?
- Have you taken drugs or alcohol?

TREATMENT

An admission to the hospital may not be needed, but a confused person should not be left alone. Stay with a family member or friend until the confusion clears. Avoid alcohol, pain relievers or sedative drugs until you have fully recovered. Do not drive until your caregiver says it is okay.

HOMECARE INSTRUCTIONS

What family and friends can do:

- To find out if someone is confused ask him or her their name, age, and the date. If the person is unsure or answers incorrectly, he or she is confused.
- Always introduce yourself, no matter how well the person knows you.
- Often remind the person of his or her location.
- Place a calendar and clock near the confused person.
- Talk about current events and plans for the day.
- Try to keep the environment calm, quiet and peaceful.
- Make sure the patient keeps follow up appointments with their physician.

PREVENTION

Ways to prevent confusion:

- Avoid alcohol.
- Eat a balanced diet.
- Get enough sleep.
- Do not become isolated. Spend time with other people and make plans for your days.
- Keep careful watch on your blood sugar levels if you are diabetic.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You develop severe headaches, repeated vomiting, seizures, blackouts or slurred speech.
- There is increasing confusion, weakness, numbness, restlessness or personality changes.
- You develop a loss of balance, have marked dizziness, feel uncoordinated or fall.
- You have delusions, hallucinations or develop severe anxiety.
- Your family members think you need to be rechecked.

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