

# Altered Mental Status: Causes, Diagnosis and Management

Ava Thompson \*

Department of Neurology and Global Health, Australian National University, Australia

## Introduction

Altered mental status (AMS) is a broad term used to describe any significant deviation from a person's normal cognitive function. It encompasses a wide range of presentations, including confusion, disorientation, delirium, lethargy, stupor, and coma. AMS is not a disease itself but rather a symptom of an underlying medical condition. It requires immediate evaluation and management to determine the cause and prevent potential complications. AMS can be acute, chronic, or fluctuating, and its causes range from infections to metabolic disorders, neurological conditions, and drug intoxications. The causes of AMS are diverse, ranging from neurological disorders such as stroke, traumatic brain injury, and seizures to metabolic imbalances like hypoglycemia and electrolyte disturbances. Infectious causes such as meningitis, sepsis, and pneumonia can also lead to AMS, particularly in vulnerable populations. Additionally, toxicological factors, including drug overdose, alcohol intoxication, and medication side effects, must be considered. Psychiatric conditions like acute psychosis and severe depression can also contribute to AMS. Given the broad differential diagnosis, a systematic approach is crucial for evaluating AMS. This includes obtaining a detailed patient history, conducting a thorough physical and neurological examination, and performing targeted laboratory and imaging studies. Identifying the underlying cause early is essential for effective treatment and improving patient outcomes [1,2]. This article explores the causes, clinical presentations, diagnostic approaches, and management strategies for AMS, emphasizing the importance of timely recognition and intervention. By understanding the complexities of AMS, healthcare providers can enhance patient care and mitigate potential complications associated with delayed or inadequate treatment [3,4].

## Discussion

Altered mental status (AMS) presents a significant challenge in clinical settings due to its broad range of potential causes. Understanding the underlying mechanisms and pathophysiology is essential in guiding appropriate treatment strategies. AMS can result from neurological, metabolic, infectious, toxicological, psychiatric, or autoimmune conditions, making a comprehensive diagnostic approach critical [5,6].

The initial evaluation of AMS includes assessing the patient's consciousness level using tools like the Glasgow Coma Scale (GCS), identifying potential focal neurological deficits, and determining whether the onset was acute or gradual. Acute onset is often associated with conditions like stroke, trauma, or metabolic imbalances, while chronic or fluctuating AMS may indicate neurodegenerative diseases or psychiatric disorders [7,8].

Laboratory investigations play a crucial role in identifying metabolic or toxic causes of AMS. Blood tests, including glucose levels, electrolytes, renal and liver function tests, and toxicology screenings, can provide valuable diagnostic clues. Imaging studies, such as computed tomography (CT) or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), help detect structural abnormalities like strokes, tumors, or hemorrhages. Additionally, cerebrospinal fluid analysis via lumbar

puncture is necessary when infections such as meningitis or encephalitis are suspected [9].

Management of AMS is highly individualized, depending on the identified cause. Immediate interventions may include stabilizing the airway, breathing, and circulation (ABC), correcting metabolic derangements, administering antidotes for toxic exposures, or initiating antimicrobial therapy for infections. In cases of psychiatric-related AMS, psychiatric consultation and appropriate medication adjustments are necessary [10].

## Causes of altered mental status

The causes of AMS can be categorized into several groups:

### Neurological causes

- Stroke or transient ischemic attack (TIA)
- Traumatic brain injury (TBI)
- Epilepsy and postictal states
- Brain tumors
- Increased intracranial pressure (hydrocephalus, brain hemorrhage)

### Metabolic and endocrine causes

- Hypoglycemia or hyperglycemia
- Hyponatremia, hypernatremia, or other electrolyte imbalances
- Hypoxia (low oxygen levels)
- Liver or kidney failure leading to hepatic or uremic encephalopathy
- Thyroid disorders (hypothyroidism or hyperthyroidism)

### Infectious causes

- Meningitis or encephalitis
- Sepsis and systemic infections
- Urinary tract infections (UTIs) in elderly patients
- Pneumonia

### Toxic and pharmacological causes

- Alcohol intoxication or withdrawal

\*Corresponding author: Ava Thompson, Department of Neurology and Global Health, Australian National University, Australia, Email: [ava@648gmail.com](mailto:ava@648gmail.com)

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Drug overdose (opioids, benzodiazepines, hallucinogens, etc.)  
Medication side effects (sedatives, antidepressants, antihistamines, etc.)

Carbon monoxide poisoning

#### Psychiatric causes

Acute psychosis

Severe depression or mania

Schizophrenia

Anxiety disorders

#### Clinical presentation

The symptoms of AMS vary depending on the underlying cause. Common presentations include:

**Confusion and disorientation:** Patients may struggle to recognize people, places, or time.

**Memory Loss:** Short-term or long-term memory deficits.

**Hallucinations or delusions:** Associated with psychiatric or neurological disorders.

**Agitation or combativeness:** May be seen in delirium or drug-induced states.

**Coma or unresponsiveness:** Severe cases of AMS may lead to coma requiring intensive care.

#### Diagnosis of altered mental status

Diagnosing AMS involves a systematic approach:

##### History taking

Gathering information from family, caregivers, or witnesses.

Reviewing medication history, substance use, and recent illnesses.

##### Physical examination

Assessing level of consciousness using the **Glasgow Coma Scale (GCS)**.

Checking vital signs for hypoxia, fever, hypotension, or hypertension.

Neurological examination for focal deficits.

##### Laboratory tests

Complete blood count (CBC) to assess for infections or anemia.

Blood glucose levels to check for hypoglycemia or hyperglycemia.

Electrolytes (sodium, potassium, calcium) to rule out metabolic imbalances.

Liver and kidney function tests.

Toxicology screening for drug overdose or poisoning.

#### Imaging studies

**CT Scan or MRI of the Brain:** To evaluate for stroke, hemorrhage, tumors, or traumatic injuries.

**EEG (Electroencephalogram):** To detect seizures or encephalopathy.

**Lumbar Puncture (Spinal Tap):** If meningitis or encephalitis is suspected.

#### Conclusion

Altered mental status is a complex clinical presentation requiring urgent evaluation and intervention. Identifying the underlying cause is crucial for effective treatment and preventing complications. Physicians must use a systematic approach, combining history, physical examination, laboratory tests, and imaging to diagnose AMS accurately. Early recognition and management can significantly improve patient outcomes, making AMS a critical topic in emergency and critical care medicine. In conclusion, AMS is a complex but manageable condition when approached with vigilance and clinical expertise. By prioritizing early detection, prompt treatment, and ongoing research, healthcare professionals can improve survival rates and quality of life for patients experiencing AMS. The ultimate goal is to ensure that every patient receives timely, accurate, and effective medical care, reducing

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