



## Patient Assessment: Altered Mental Status

Firefighters commonly respond to medical emergencies for patients with altered mental status (AMS). Just as no two fires are exactly alike, no two patients with AMS have the exact same signs, symptoms, and causes. Although there are numerous causes and treatments for a patient with AMS, firefighters must develop a systematic and thorough approach for initial patient assessment.



1. **SCENE SAFETY & YOUR SAFETY**— Patients with AMS may be confused, uncooperative, and even combative. Approach these patients with caution and in a non-confrontational manner.
2. **ASSESS LEVEL OF CONSCIOUSNESS**— Does the patient respond when you walk in the room? Or do they require verbal or painful stimuli (i.e.-sternal rub) to awaken them?
3. **LIFE-SAVING INTERVENTIONS**— Treat any major life threats appropriately (Open airway, ensure adequate oxygenation, treat for shock, etc.).
4. **OBTAIN VITAL SIGNS**— Blood Pressure, Pulse (rate/quality), Respiratory Rate, Lung Sounds, Oxygen Saturation (if equipped), and **Blood Glucose**.
5. **ASK A THOROUGH PATIENT HISTORY**— Ask their name, the date, current location and if they know why FIRE/EMS was called to the scene. Obtain a SAMPLE history and OPQRST if pain is present.
6. **IF STROKE IS SUSPECTED, PERFORM THE CINCINNATI PREHOSPITAL STROKE SCALE**



1) FACIAL DROOP?



2) ARM DRIFT?



3) ABNORMAL OR NO SPEECH?

### COMMON CAUSES OF ALTERED MENTAL STATUS

- **DRUG/ALCOHOL TOXICITY:** Intentional and unintentional over dose of medications as well as too much alcohol will adversely affect the central nervous system.
- **CEREBROVASCULAR EVENT:** Strokes (ischemic/hemorrhagic) and Transient Ischemic Attacks (TIA's) cause inadequate blood and oxygen supply to the brain.
- **CARDIAC:** Poor blood and oxygen perfusion to the brain may result from a heart attack, congestive heart failure (CHF), or abnormal heart rhythms.
- **TRAUMA:** Falls, assaults, motor vehicle accidents, and other sources of blunt trauma to the head may cause temporary or permanent brain damage.
- **PSYCHIATRIC:** Depending on a patient's psychiatric illness, they may experience hallucinations, confusion, and abnormal speech.
- **ENDOCRINIC:** Diabetic emergencies (High/Low blood glucose).
- **NEUROLOGIC:** Seizures can cause irregular or absent breathing. This will result in inadequate oxygen supply to the brain, resulting in confusion.

### OBTAINING A BLOOD GLUCOSE



Clean patient's finger with alcohol prep and let dry.



Insert test strip into glucometer.



Pierce finger with lancet, then squeeze for blood sample.



Obtain blood sample on test strip.

**NORMAL RANGE IS  
70-120 mg/dl**

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