

Several conditions share similar symptoms. Your healthcare provider will examine your symptoms before making a diagnosis and offering treatment. If the treatment is not successful, your healthcare provider may offer another diagnosis based on how your symptoms relate to another condition.

The following symptoms and differential diagnoses are examples of what your healthcare provider might consider before making a final diagnosis. Contact your healthcare provider if you experience symptoms to diagnose and treat your condition.

Abdominal pain - Symptoms of abdominal pain include an ache, cramps or sharp pains at mild to severe levels localized to a specific area in your stomach region. A differential diagnosis of abdominal pain includes: "Appendicitis." "Gastritis." "Inflammatory bowel disease." "Intestinal or bowel blockage." "Pancreatitis."

Asthma - Symptoms of asthma include shortness of breath, wheezing, pain or a tight feeling in your chest and coughing. A differential diagnosis of asthma includes: "Allergic rhinitis." "Bronchitis." "Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)." "Pneumonia."

Back pain - Symptoms of back pain include aching, burning or sharp, stabbing pain that increases when standing, walking, lifting objects or twisting. A differential diagnosis of back pain includes: "Arthritis." "Disk hernia." "Fibromyalgia." "Osteoporosis."

Chest pain - Symptoms of chest pain include aching, sharp pain, burning sensations, tightness or squeezing pressure localized in your chest area. A differential diagnosis of chest pain includes: "Angina." "Anxiety." "Muscle strain." "Pneumonia." "Viral infection."

Cough - Symptoms of a cough include clearing your throat of mucus or fluids and clearing your throat of dry air, irritation or tickle in the back of your throat. A differential diagnosis of cough includes: "Asthma." "Bronchitis." "Pneumonia." "Reflux." "Seasonal allergies."

Depression - Symptoms of depression include fatigue, low energy, anxiety, showing a range of emotions and appetite changes. A differential diagnosis of depression includes: "Anxiety." "Bipolar disorder." "Dementia." "Hypothyroidism."

Elevated alkaline phosphatase - Symptoms of elevated alkaline phosphatase include stomach or abdominal pain, nausea and vomiting and a yellow color to the skin (jaundice). A differential diagnosis of elevated alkaline phosphatase includes but is not limited to: "Blockage in the liver, gall bladder or bile ducts." "Gallstones." "Liver disease."

Fatigue - Symptoms of fatigue include feeling tired, lack of energy, not getting enough sleep and feeling weak throughout your entire body. A differential diagnosis of fatigue includes but is not limited to: "Anemia." "Depression." "Insomnia." "Thyroid disease."

Headache - Symptoms of a headache include head pain that ranges in severity from mild to severe, a throbbing sensation and sensitivity to lights and sounds with symptoms that last for hours or up to several days. A differential diagnosis of a headache includes:

Hypertension - Symptoms of hypertension include chest pain, headaches, dizziness, shortness of breath and feeling tired. A differential diagnosis of hypertension includes: "Kidney disease." "Sleep apnea." "Thyroid disease."

Knee pain - Symptoms of knee pain include swelling around the knee, instability when standing, stiffness and popping noises when you move your knee. A differential diagnosis of knee pain includes: "Arthritis." "Cartilage tear." "Osteoarthritis." "Strained ligaments." "Tendonitis."

Urinary tract infection (UTI) - Symptoms of a urinary tract infection include feeling like you need to pee even when you have an empty bladder, feeling a burning sensation when you pee and urinating often. A differential diagnosis of a urinary tract infection includes: "Chlamydia." "Gonorrhea." "Interstitial cystitis." "Vaginal yeast infection."

A note from Cleveland Clinic

A differential diagnosis is a helpful step in the process that your healthcare provider uses to make a final diagnosis. It may seem overwhelming to see a list of possible conditions that might affect you, but remember that your differential diagnosis is not the final diagnosis. Your healthcare provider will recommend additional tests to confirm your diagnosis and offer treatment to alleviate your symptoms.

Chest pain - Chest pain is a symptom that can have many causes. Some are relatively mild, whereas others are serious and require immediate medical attention.

If a person is experiencing chest pain, a doctor will need to ask questions to determine certain factors, such as the location, severity, and frequency of the pain.

These questions may include the following:

How do you feel? Describe the sensation. Where does it hurt? Does the pain extend to any other part of your body? Did anything trigger the pain? How long has the pain lasted? Has anything made the pain better or worse? Have you experienced any other symptoms?

By asking these questions, the doctor will hopefully be able to categorize the chest pain as one of the following types:

Cardiac: These conditions relate to the heart. Examples include "unstable angina" and "heart attack."
Pulmonary: These conditions relate to the lungs. Examples include: "pulmonary embolism," "pulmonary hypertension," "pneumonia."
Gastrointestinal: These conditions relate to the digestive system. Examples include "gastroesophageal reflux disease," which can lead to "Barrett's esophagus," and "peptic ulcers."
Musculoskeletal: These conditions relate to the muscles, bones, and connective tissues. Examples include "fractured ribs" and other trauma to the chest wall or sternum.
Miscellaneous: This category describes other potential causes of chest pain, such as: "anxiety," "panic attacks," "lymphoma."

Once the doctor has narrowed down the type of pain, they will order diagnostic tests to determine the potential cause of the pain. These tests may include:

electrocardiogram (EKG) echocardiogram (echo) endoscopy X-ray

Headaches Headaches are a common issue. Because of this, it can be difficult for a doctor to determine when a headache is a benign irritation, and when it is a serious health concern.

During differential diagnosis, a doctor will look for certain red flags that indicate that the headache is more than just an inconvenience. These red flags include the sudden onset of severe headache and headache following head trauma.

The sudden onset of severe headache could indicate several underlying conditions, such as "subarachnoid hemorrhage" or "pituitary apoplexy." Headache following head trauma could indicate "intracranial hemorrhage," "subdural hematoma," or "epidural hematoma."

The doctor will ask the following questions to determine whether or not the headache poses a serious risk to the person's health:

Did the headache start gradually or suddenly? Did anything trigger the headache? Where is the pain? Does the pain seem to spread to any other area? If so, where? What kind of pain do you have? Is it throbbing, stabbing, dull, or something else? How bad is your pain, on a scale of 1 to 10? Do you have headaches regularly? Is this your first or worst headache? Is this headache like the ones you usually have? Do you have other symptoms that occur with the headache?

In some cases, the doctor may perform a neurological exam. This exam may assess multiple factors, including:

the pupils' responses to light responses to or sensation of touch deep tendon reflexes motor strength gait

A medical history and physical exam can narrow down the possible causes of headache. Neuroimaging tests using CT or MRI scans can help rule out or confirm certain diagnoses.

Stroke - Stroke requires prompt diagnosis and treatment. Because of this, many doctors turn to a differential diagnostic method when considering the possibility of a stroke.

During the physical examination, a doctor will check a person for the following symptoms of a stroke:

confusion reduced mental alertness problems with coordination and balance problems with vision numbness or weakness of the face, arms, or legs difficulty speaking or communicating

The doctor will look through a person's medical history to see if they have any medical conditions that may increase their risk of stroke. Such conditions include:

"high blood pressure" "high cholesterol" "diabetes" "atherosclerosis," including "carotid artery disease"

The doctor will then order one or more of the following tests:

blood tests a CT scan, to look for possible bleeding on the brain an MRI scan, to check the brain tissue for signs of damage an ECG or EKG, to look for heart problems that could have caused a stroke

How to interpret the results A person may require multiple in-office examinations and diagnostic tests before they receive a definitive diagnosis.

Some patients may have multiple negative test results before they get a diagnosis. However, each negative test result brings the doctor one step closer to figuring out the cause of a person's symptoms.

Some people may need to begin treatment before a doctor has confirmed their diagnosis. This may be the case if one of the potential causes of a person's symptoms requires prompt treatment to prevent further complications.

A person's response to a particular treatment can itself provide valuable insights into the cause of their symptoms.