

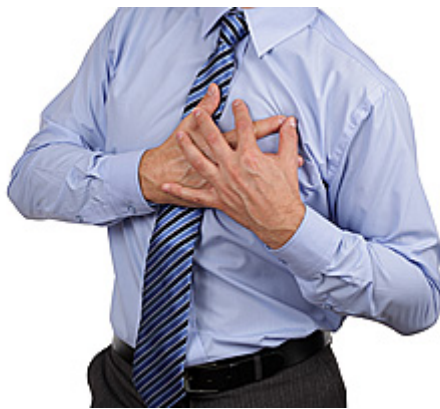
10 Medical Symptoms You Should Not Ignore

By Scott LaFee | March 04, 2014

From time to time, we all don't feel well. Sometimes the cause seems obvious: We've caught a cold or the flu. We overdid it at the gym. The occasional ache or pain, a sore throat or a general sense of the blahs is normal and unavoidable. It's a part of life.

But there are times – and signs – when your body is telling you (insisting really) that now is the moment to pay attention, that something is seriously wrong and you need to see a doctor immediately. Below are 10 symptoms that should not be ignored. They are red flags to seek medical attention as soon as possible.

Don't dismiss them. These symptoms may turn out to be nothing serious, but you won't know that for sure without seeing a physician. They may signal serious disease or even a looming threat to life.



- **Chest pain:** Extreme discomfort that feels like squeezing, pressure or tightness. May be accompanied by pain radiating down an arm, nausea, vomiting, sweating or difficulty breathing. **What it might mean:** A heart attack. Other possibilities include gastrointestinal reflux or GER (sometimes called acid reflux), which happens when stomach contents flow back up into the esophagus. GER isn't life-threatening, but it can become a chronic condition.
- **Shortness of breath:** A sudden feeling that you're breathing faster than usual, without obvious explanation, and without good effect. Worsens when you lie flat or exert yourself. Wheezing or gasping. **What it might mean:** A blood clot or embolism has lodged in the

lungs or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, both very serious. Other possibilities include asthma, bronchitis, pneumonia and extreme emotional distress or anxiety.

- **Sudden intense headache:** This is head pain unlike anything you've felt before, peaking in seconds or minutes. **What it might mean:** An aneurysm or burst blood vessel in the brain. Immediate medical attention is required. Other possibilities include meningitis or shingles.
- **Unexplained weight loss:** Losing more than 5 percent of your body weight without trying in less than six months. **What it might mean:** Cancer. Many types of cancer are characterized by severe, unwanted weight loss. Other possibilities include endocrine disorders, diabetes and clinical depression.
- **Unusual bleeding:** For example, rectal bleeding or black or tarry stools. Or bloody vomit. **What it might mean:** Ulcers and colon cancer can cause rectal bleeding; stomach, lung and esophageal cancers can trigger bloody vomit. Other possibilities include hemorrhoids. Coughing up blood may be linked to bronchitis, pneumonia or tuberculosis. Blood in urine can be the result of bladder or kidney infections. Postmenopausal vaginal bleeding may be due to the growth of polyps or fibroids.
- **High or persistent fever:** Anything 103 degrees Fahrenheit or higher warrants an immediate trip to the doctor, without exception. A low-grade fever (somewhere around 100 degrees) for several weeks with no obvious cause should also be checked out. **What it might be:** Fever is part of your body's infection-fighting defenses, but an extremely high fever may signal severe illness, from a urinary tract infection and pneumonia to endocarditis (inflammation of the heart lining) and meningitis. A persistent low-grade fever could be a sign of a sinus infection or of some cancers, such as lymphoma and leukemia. Other possibilities include a viral infection, which depending upon the bug and general health of the person might require hospitalization.
- **Sudden confusion:** Or inexplicable changes in personality, aggression or an inability to concentrate. **What it might be:** Worst case scenario – a brain tumor or bleeding in the brain. Stroke is another possibility, especially if confusion is combined with numbness or weakness in the face, hands or legs and slurred speech. If so, immediate medical attention is essential to reduce the chance of irreversible brain damage. Other possibilities include reactions to new medicines or interactions between medicines or alcohol. Abnormal blood pressure, low blood sugar and dehydration may also be causes.
- **Swelling in the legs:** Persistent, accumulated fluid (edema) in the extremities. **What it might be:** Swollen legs are a symptom of many conditions, but perhaps most worrisome is heart failure. The heart just isn't adequately circulating blood through the body, causing some blood and other fluids to back up in the limbs. Other possibilities include vein problems and hypothyroidism (not enough of the thyroid hormone).

- **Sudden or severe abdominal pain:** Centralized around the belly button. Sharp and unexpected. **What it might be:** An aortic aneurysm or rupture, which is a bulge in the aorta, the largest artery in the body. Alternatively, it could be a perforation of the viscus (stomach, intestine or other hollow organ), usually due to an ulcer. Or intestinal ischemia, which means blood flow slows or stops to the intestines, causing oxygen starvation in affected tissues. Other possibilities include gallstones, diverticulitis (inflammation in the large intestine), irritable bowel syndrome or appendicitis.
 - **Flashes of light:** Bright spots, flashes or other visual disturbances. **What it might be:** A detached retina, which means immediate medical care is needed to prevent permanent vision loss. Lights can also signal the coming or arrival of a migraine.
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