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Major Physical Exam

When a patient presents with a substantial illness (acute or chronic), it is helpful to conduct a reasonably thorough physical exam to (1) establish baseline physical status, and (2) look for clues/features that point towards underlying diagnosis(es).

There is no single “major physical exam” that is appropriate for all patients, as features on history, specific physical findings, and/or observed changes in the patient’s condition can all influence the assessment.

General/Vitals

- one sentence description of how the patient looks and what the patient is doing
 - ↳ include any obvious features (e.g. jaundiced, cachectic, colicky) or lack thereof
 - ↳ describe changes over any observation period (e.g. when defervesces)
- **HR, BP** - note inotropes (if any); record different BPs (e.g. supine vs. standing)
- **RR, O2 saturation** - note any oxygen use by patient
- **Temp** - indicate where taken (e.g. axillary, forehead)

Head/Neck

- **nodes, thyroid, trachea** (midline or otherwise)
- **ears (TMs)** - record if unable to visualize due to cerumen; if critical to observe (eg. for ear pain or trauma), curette cerumen and then exam TMs
- **eyes** - conjunctiva, fundi, presence of hyphema; consider slit lamp exam

Resp

- **Air Entry (A/E)** - comment on all lung fields
 - ↳ note duration ratio of inspiratory phase:expiratory phase
- **adventitia** - describe sounds, location, presence in respiratory cycle

CVS

- **Heart Sounds (H/S)** - comment on S1,S2, presence of S3, S4, murmurs
- **JVP, peripheral pulses, carotid bruits**
- **Presence of abdominal aneurysm**
- **venous insufficiency, edema**

ABD

- **bowel sounds** (eg. present, absent, “tinkling”, hyperactive)
- **palpation** (on **light** and **deep** palpation; note any peritoneal signs)
- **DRE** (note masses, blood, melena, injury)

GU

- costovertebral angle (**CVA**) thumping - note tenderness
- ♀ - **cervical features** (eg. motion tenderness, open/closed on spec exam)
adenexal features (eg. fullness, tenderness)
- ♂ - **penis, scrotum, testes, inguinal canal**

NEURO

- cranial nerves (**CN**) II - XII
- **motor, deep tendon reflexes** (triceps, biceps, patellar, achilles)
- **cerebellum** - finger/nose, hand-flipping, heel-shin

MSK / INT

- joint appearance, tenderness, range of motion
- skin appearance (eruptions, injury, hue, etc.)
- palms/soles - emboli, nodes, peeling/sloughing
- nails - clubbing, psoriatic pits, petechiae

MSE

- **affect, suicidal/homicidal ideation**
- **orientation** (person, place, time/date)
- **cognition** (quick screen: serial 7’s and three item delayed recall)