

Guide for Readers

This book presumes that the reader has received instruction in taking a medical history and performing a general physical examination and is familiar with basic physiology, anatomy, and the pathology of common diseases.

Each symptom begins with a list of **causes**, calling out whenever possible the ones that are more common, more dangerous, or both.

For clarity, the **history** and **physical examination** contain only the elements that are most likely to be pertinent to that symptom. In an actual clinical encounter, students would be expected to perform a complete history and physical examination unless directed otherwise by their supervisor.

A brief bulleted list of **red flag** findings represents signs that often indicate a serious problem and that typically should be quickly brought to the attention of the supervisor.

The section on **interpretation of findings** of the history and physical examination is necessarily truncated, and only the most suggestive clinical patterns are mentioned. In this book, diagnosis is presented as a search for a "classic" pattern of symptoms and signs. In reality, although these patterns are suggestive when present, few patients with a given disease have all of its classic manifestations, and some have only a few. Although we mention some of the varying manifestations of disease, descriptions center on the typical findings and are thus only a starting point for clinicians. It is appropriate to have a healthy clinical suspicion, particularly for dangerous disorders, and to remember that the absence of a classic pattern does not prove absence of the disease. On the other hand, students should not become so focused on the exceptions and atypical presentations that they become diagnostic nihilists (ie, "anything can present like anything").

Testing is discussed in a practical manner, attempting to give clear direction on which tests are necessary and when. In most cases, **treatment** of the symptom is best accomplished by treatment of the causative disease. Such discussions are beyond the scope and intent of this book, and we refer readers to *The Merck Manual*. We do, however, cover nonspecific treatment aimed at symptom relief when possible (eg, constipation, cough, itching).

Important: The authors and editors of this book have made extensive efforts to ensure that the information is accurate and conforms to standard practice at the time of publication. However, unique aspects of individual clinical situations require that the reader exercise independent judgment when making a clinical decision and, if necessary, consult and compare information from other sources. In particular, the reader is advised to check drug product information provided by the manufacturer before prescribing, especially if the drug is unfamiliar or is used infrequently.

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The Merck Manual of Diagnosis and Therapy, 18th Edition (2006)

The Merck Manual of Medical Information—Home Edition, 2nd Edition (2003)

The Merck Index, 14th Edition (2006)

The Merck Veterinary Manual, 9th Edition (2005)

The Merck/Merial Manual for Pet Health, 1st Edition (2007)