

Preface

For over a century, *The Merck Manual of Diagnosis and Therapy* has been the most widely used medical reference book in the world. *The Merck Manual* provides medical information, especially disease information, to clinicians and students of the health care professions. Although knowledge of disease is essential to the practice of medicine, patients present with *symptoms*, the starting point in the process of diagnosis.

This new book, *The Merck Manual of Patient Symptoms*, complements *The Merck Manual* and is intended to help newcomers to clinical diagnosis approach patients who present with certain common symptoms. Although challenging for all, students in particular struggle to gather relevant information and sort a patient's varied sensations, worries, and physical findings into a coherent picture. This picture gives rise to either a diagnosis or a list of possibilities (differential diagnosis) that can be narrowed down by the judicious use of tests. The sorting and narrowing process is difficult to formalize, hence the relatively low clinical usefulness of most algorithms, computer-based expert systems, and neural networks in patient diagnosis.

The material is structured to provide a framework for understanding a symptom (see also Guide for Readers). Each symptom discussion will be more useful to students when read in full rather than in bits and pieces. Experienced clinicians may read selectively to be reminded of details of differential diagnosis or evaluation of less familiar symptoms. For all, the information will make more sense and be better retained when read shortly before or after an actual patient encounter.

We hope that *The Merck Manual of Patient Symptoms* will serve as an aid to you, our readers, compatible with your needs and worthy of frequent use. We thank the dozens of contributors who have poured their knowledge into this volume. Because our contributors are all respected experts in their specialty, having *The Merck Manual of Patient Symptoms* to refer to will be like having a consultant in your pocket. Suggestions for improvements will be warmly welcomed and carefully considered.

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