

What Your Symptoms Might Be Telling You

by Amy Scholten, M.P.H.

Our bodies often use symptoms to alert us that something is out of balance. Many common symptoms are signs that we need to make some changes in our lifestyles such as reducing stress, exercising, or eating a healthier diet. The following assessment is based on a list of 12 common symptoms and their possible causes. Please keep in mind that this assessment is neither a diagnostic tool nor a substitute for medical care. Any symptoms that are persistent or bothersome should be evaluated by a qualified medical professional.

Directions:

Gastrointestinal Symptoms

1. Constipation: Hard, dry stools that are difficult to pass _____
2. Heartburn/Acid Reflux: Burning beneath the breastbone or acid regurgitation which often starts after eating _____
3. Gas/Bloating: Burping, flatulence, expansion of the abdomen _____

Nervous System Symptoms

4. Fatigue: Feeling tired, weak, run down _____
5. Daytime Sleepiness _____
6. Insomnia: Difficulty falling or staying asleep _____
7. Nightmares: Disturbing or terrifying dreams _____
8. Heart palpitations: The sensation that the heart is skipping beats or pounding _____

Pain

9. Neck and Shoulders _____

10. Back _____

11. Headache _____

12. Abdominal pain _____

Decoding Your Symptoms

Symptom	Possible "Message"
#1	Constipation can be a mild situation or severe enough to require emergency care. Mild to moderate constipation may be telling you that you need to eat more dietary fiber, drink more water, and get more exercise. Constipation can also be caused by stress, certain medications (for example, narcotics for pain) and medical conditions. If constipation is severe or persistent, seek medical care.
#2	Heartburn/acid reflux may occur after eating large meals and consuming certain foods or drinks. Do you experience heartburn after eating any of the following foods—chocolate, fried or fatty foods, spicy foods, tomatoes, citrus fruits, peppermint, coffee and other caffeinated drinks, alcohol, and carbonated drinks? If so, the message may be to eat fewer of these foods. Other factors that contribute to heartburn include being overweight, smoking, wearing tight belts and waistbands, stress, and lying down after eating. Certain medications, such as aspirin, ibuprofen and naproxen can also cause heartburn. Persistent heartburn can be a sign of gastrointestinal disease and should be evaluated by a health care professional. Also beware that it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish heartburn from chest pain or heart attack.
#3	Common causes of gas and bloating are diet the breakdown of carbohydrates and sugars, bacterial overgrowth of the small intestine, eating too fast, swallowing air, and stress. Other causes include medical conditions (such as lactose intolerance, celiac disease), obstruction in the digestive system, and irritable bowel syndrome. Persistent gas and bloating should be evaluated by a health care professional.
#4	Common causes of fatigue include lack of exercise, stress, poor diet, not drinking enough water, overwork, lack of sleep, boredom, worry, depression, colds and flu. However, many disease processes from mild to serious involve fatigue. Persistent fatigue should always be evaluated by a health care professional.

#5	Common causes of daytime sleepiness include sleep interruptions, sleep disorders (sleep apnea, insomnia, narcolepsy) shift work, irregular schedules, being overweight, taking certain prescription drugs, abusing drugs or alcohol. Persistent daytime sleepiness should always be evaluated by a health care professional.
#6	Common causes of insomnia include psychological causes, physical causes and environmental causes. Do you have excessive worries, stress, or feel depressed? If you're a woman, does your insomnia occur at certain times of the month (premenstrual syndrome) or are you going through menopause? Do you overuse caffeine and alcohol or take prescription drugs that disrupt your sleep? Does pain or discomfort keep you awake? Is your environment noisy or is there too much light in your bedroom? Insomnia is also common in the elderly and in people who have certain medical conditions. Persistent insomnia should always be evaluated by a physician.
#7	Common causes of nightmares include late night snacking, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, sleep disorders, sleep deprivation, certain medications such as antidepressants, and withdrawal from alcohol or certain drugs. If you have persistent nightmares, please see your physician.
#8	Heart palpitations are usually not serious. Common causes include stress, anxiety, fear, panic attacks, use of caffeine or nicotine, illegal drugs such as cocaine, diet pills, certain medications, exercise, and fever. Sometimes heart palpitations are due to abnormal heart rhythms and medical conditions such as heart murmur, overactive thyroid, and low levels of oxygen in the blood. If you have frequent or persistent heart palpitations, please see your physician.
#9	Neck pain is most often caused by tension, stress, strain or spasm in the neck muscles. Do you engage in activities that stress your neck, such as sitting at a computer for long periods of time? You can also develop neck pain from poor posture or the faulty ergonomic set up of your desk or work station. Other causes of neck pain include injuries, whiplash from car accidents, and many medical conditions. If you have persistent neck pain, please see your physician.
#10	Common causes of back pain include forceful movements or postures that strain the muscles. Poor posture, prolonged sitting, being overweight, and lack of exercise increase the risk of back pain. Sometimes back pain has emotional causes such as stress. Other causes of back pain include many medical conditions, arthritis, and problems with the spine and discs. If you have persistent back pain, please see your physician.

#11	Headache can have many causes but the most common ones include stress, tension, not drinking enough water, poor nutrition, excessive intake of sweets, alcohol or caffeine, fatigue, lack of sleep, eyestrain, allergy, infections, and exposure to chemicals. Numerous medications and medical conditions can cause headache. If you have persistent or severe headaches, please see your physician.
#12	Common causes of abdominal (stomach) pain include indigestion, stress, eating too many spicy or fatty foods, irritable bowel syndrome (with constipation or diarrhea), menstrual cramps, stomach virus, stomach irritation (gastritis) and rushed eating. However, many medical conditions and medications can cause stomach pain. If you have severe or persistent stomach pain, please see your physician.

Source:

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Biography

Amy Scholten, MPH, has a Master of Public Health in health promotion and education from the University of South Carolina and a Bachelor of Science in food and nutrition from Framingham State College. She is a freelance health writer and has taught stress management at Ithaca College in Ithaca, NY, USA.