

TIP OF THE MONTH

Please provide your therapist with a detailed medical history and history of your injury so she/he may provide you with the best overall level of care.



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**PHYSICAL THERAPY
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RED FLAGS



RED FLAGS



Presented by:



**PHYSICAL THERAPY
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Did you ever wonder why your physical therapist asks about your medical history and specifics of your symptoms?

Answer: Your medical history may help us determine appropriate treatment options and the details of your symptoms will lead to an accurate assessment of your problem. Occasionally a patient presents to their Physical Therapist with symptoms of other health concerns that need referral to another specialist. For example, the concerns could be cardiac, other organ dysfunction, cancer, or autoimmune disease. A therapist determines the significance of your symptoms by paying attention to “Red Flags” that may indicate a more serious problem.

What is a Red Flag?

“Any potential signs and symptoms that would indicate the problem is not a musculoskeletal one or a more serious problem that should be referred to the appropriate health care professional” (Magee 2007)

Some of the more common Red Flags (by diagnosis) are:

Cancer:

- night pain not relieved by rest and/or worse with laying down.
- previous history of cancer.
- presence of abnormal (hard, fixed) lymph nodes
- pain with unknown origin in combination with other cancer red flags.
- fever.
- weight loss without trying.

Cardiac:

- sudden onset of acute chest pain with difficulty breathing.
- chest pain occurring without exertion lasting longer than 10 minutes, not relieved by rest/nitroglycerin.
- chest, neck, shoulder pain aggravated by exertion, precipitated by working with arms overhead (>5 mins), lightheadedness and profuse perspiration which are unaffected by change in position, breathing, or movement.

- shoulder pain with dyspnea, toothache, belching, nausea, or pressure behind sternum and relieved by nitroglycerin or antacid drugs.

Gastrointestinal:

- abdominal pain radiating to midback, symptoms associated with food, worse after NSAID's.
- difficulty or pain with swallowing.
- bloody stool/ diarrhea.
- dark abnormal stool/ dark urine.
- symptoms aggravated in supine/ relieved in upright position.
- nausea, vomiting.
- heart burn/ indigestion.
- pain relieved by passing gas/ bowel movement.
- pain aggravated by intra-abdominal pressure i.e. standing, walking, coughing, intercourse, valsava maneuver (holding breath while straining).

Osteonecrosis: (Bone death)

- most common in the hip
- long term use of immunosuppressants, including steroids.
- hip pain mild in the beginning progressively worsens, worse with weight bearing.
- groin/ anterior medial thigh pain.
- limited hip range of motion.
- tenderness to palpation over the hip joint.
- hip stiffness/ problems with dislocation.
- possible “click” in hip with sit to stand easily ruled out with imaging.

Cardiac Red Flags are further delineated to distinguish the significant differences in the signs and symptoms of potential heart attacks between males and females:

Males:

- “squeezing.
- fullness” pressure discomfort under sternum, mid or entire chest region.
- pain may occur in jaw, upper neck, midback, or down arm without chest pain.

- pain in arm (usually left, sometimes both) is most often along the ulnar nerve distribution---along the outer arm.

Females:

- classic chest discomfort.
- dyspnea (shortness of breath or difficulty breathing).
- weakness or lethargy.
- indigestion or heart burn.
- lower abdominal pain.
- anxiety/depression.
- sleep disturbances.
- isolated midthoracic back pain.
- isolated right biceps ache.
- sensation of “inhaling cold air”.

How does awareness of these and other red flags help your therapist determine a treatment plan?

- 1- History of cancer is at least a precaution for the use of ultrasound as studies have shown that when it is used over a cancerous cell it will increase the growth rate of that cell.
- 2- Cardiac concerns may limit use of electrical stimulation especially with more serious arrhythmias or cardiac pacemaker. They may also limit the intensity of exercise.

Reference: Medical Red Flags: Recognition and Referral by Shawn Houck April 2010.

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