

Symptoms You Should Never Ignore

Got pains or problems that come & go? Here's what to tell your doctor. Symptoms that come and go are challenging to patient and physician alike. But they are not to be dismissed, because they can signal serious, even life-threatening conditions. Here's are some of the most significant ones:

- **Abnormal heart rhythms**, such as atrial fibrillation. Many a trip to an emergency room has been for naught as the palpitations suddenly subside in the waiting room. Ambulatory electrocardiographic monitoring is often needed to catch the culprit in the act, because an accurate diagnosis is essential for proper treatment.
- **Transient ischemic attacks (TIAs)**, or mini-strokes, caused by vascular disease in the brain, which causes speech and balance problems or facial or limb weakness or numbness. Between attacks, the victim feels fine. Blood thinners can lessen the likelihood of a full-fledged stroke.
- **Atypical seizure disorders**, or isolated, brief episodes of abnormal behavior or visual or auditory hallucinations. I recall a patient with a brain tumor whose initial symptom was hearing fragments of classical music.
- **Assorted rare hormone-producing tumors**. One type of adrenal tumor, for instance, can produce surges of adrenalin, resulting in light-headedness, palpitations, and headache.

As a patient, your most important tool is your intimate knowledge of your symptoms. Your goal should be to communicate them to your doctor in as much detail as you can manage, and:

- **Leave nothing out**, even if you don't think it's within the professional purview of the specialist you're seeing. I once had a patient whose serious pituitary disorder, Cushing's disease, went undiagnosed for five years because she went to an internist for her diabetes, a cardiologist for her hypertension, an orthopedist for her backache, and a dermatologist for her easily bruised skin, and never mentioned all four symptoms, highly characteristic of Cushing's, to any of them.
- **Describe your symptoms in context**. If they change after, say, eating or physical activity, be sure to mention it. A patient scheduled for surgery for a slipped disk in his neck mentioned during his preoperative consultation that movement didn't make his pain worse but climbing stairs did, a fact he had never shared with his orthopedists. It turned out that his neck was not the problem; the symptoms were caused by coronary artery disease.
- **Be persistent**. Don't give up if the first doctors you see can't figure out what ails you.

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