

RED FLAGS

&

RED HERRINGS



Tom Hewetson

Registered Osteopath

Definition of a red flag (for the musculoskeletal system)

“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 healthcare professional.”

(McGee, D (2008). Orthopaedic physical assessment: Musculoskeletal rehabilitation series, 5th edition. Elsevier health sciences pp2.)

Definition of a red Herring

“a clue or piece of information which is or is intended to be misleading or distracting.”

E.G.

The crushing chest pain of a heart attack is hard to ignore and an obvious red flag

But not all heart attacks cause chest pain, and chest pain can be caused by problems that have nothing to do with the heart.

After eating a big meal you feel a burning sensation in your chest. Heartburn, right? Probably, but there's a chance that it's a heart attack. Heartburn, angina and heart attack may feel very much alike.

Not all symptoms are concerning and not all are as obvious as crushing chest pain

Some of the most important signs and symptoms are those that are thought of as red flags, these imply to us that something is not what it seems.

HISTORY!

Listen!

EXAMINATION

LOOK, FEEL, MOVE!
(clinical testing)

TESTS

specialist test

Some Red Flag conditions

- Major trauma
- Minor trauma (with systemic disease e.g. osteoporosis)
- Age over 50 years (new back pain) or under 20 years (with inactivity)
- History of cancer
- Constitutional symptoms, e.g. fever, chills, unexplained weight loss
- Recent bacterial infection (e.g. urinary tract infection)
- Intravenous drug abuse
- Immune suppression
- Thoracic pain (unexplained)
- Saddle anaesthesia
- Recent onset of difficulty with bladder or bowels
- **Neurological symptoms / signs**
- Progressive pain
- AAA

Findings on examination

- Structural deformity (new)
- **Severe or progressive neurological changes in the extremities**
- **Sensory loss**
- **Major motor weakness**
- **Cannot reproduce symptoms by mechanical provocative tests**
- Systemic signs and symptoms

Signs and symptoms

A sign is objective evidence, something that can be seen

A Symptom is subjective evidence, something that is felt / experienced but not seen

Peripheral Nervous System (PNS) Signs and Symptoms

Motor signs and symptoms of PNS dysfunction - Lower Motor Neurone Lesion (LMNL)

Sensory signs and symptoms of PNS dysfunction

Central Nervous System (CNS) Signs and Symptoms

Motor signs and symptoms of CNS dysfunction - Upper Motor Neurone Lesion (UMNL)

Sensory signs and symptoms of CNS dysfunction

In Summary

- Red Flags are not always obvious their can be ambiguity
- Taking a comprehensive case history is paramount
- A clinical examination is a must to follow up on the case history (check for signs of the presenting symptoms)
- Specialist tests are not always necessary and are case dependant
- When red flags are obvious these should be acted on and referred appropriately
- With regards to the central and peripheral nervous systems there are signs and symptoms that indicate something is not as it should be, and should be acted on and referred appropriately

Thank you for listening