



Gastrointestinal Medicine

Abdominal disease Symptoms and Signs



Pain

- One of the commonest symptoms of abdominal disease
- Take a pain history: site, character, radiation, onset, duration, aggravating and relieving factors
- Visceral pain is caused by distension of hollow muscular organs (e.g. ureter)
- Epigastric pain may be cardiac, oesophageal, gastric, biliary or hepatic
- Colic occurs when there is sustained muscular contraction against an obstruction (e.g. common bile duct)
- If irritated organs are directly in contact with the parietal peritoneum they cause well localised pain
- Atherosclerosis in the mesenteric vessels may cause mesenteric angina (worse on eating when the vascular demands of the gut increase)

Heartburn

- Caused by reflux of gastric acid into the oesophagus

- Causes include obesity and hiatus hernia, in which the gastro-oesophageal junction prolapses into the inferior chest

Pain when eating

- Gives a clue towards peptic / duodenal ulceration causing functional weight loss
- Mesenteric ischaemia

Dysphagia

- Principally a symptom of oesophageal obstruction; assess if it is complete or worse with liquids or solids and if there is general weight loss
- Dysphagia always requires further investigation to exclude neoplasia; commoner causes include benign strictures, oesophagitis; less common but potentially life threatening causes include extrinsic pressure (e.g. lung malignancies and oesophageal carcinoma)

Anorexia and Nausea

- Anorexia is a non-specific generalised symptom
- Nausea is common in gastric and hepatic pathology even in the absence of vomiting

Vomiting

- Occurs for a variety of causes
- Ask the patient about the nature of the vomit
 - is it blood stained or frank blood?
 - is it bile stained – indicating communication between the duodenum and stomach?
- Think about the effect of gastric irritants such as non steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs or alcohol

Constipation

- Constipation (and change of bowel habit) may herald serious underlying pathology particularly when associated with a sense of incomplete evacuation called tenesmus
 - Causes include lack of fibre and exercise, carcinoma and strictures
 - Note that episodes of intermittent diarrhoea may represent overflow diarrhoea

Urine and stool colour

- Post hepatic jaundice is heralded by dark urine and pale stools, as the dark, water soluble, conjugated bilirubin is excreted into the urine rather than the GI tract