**Exploding Symptoms**

For every symptom you elicit in a history (whether it’s the presenting complaint or not), you must ask a series of further, symptom-specific questions relating to that symptom - this is called ‘exploding’ the symptom. After you explode symptoms present, you must also ask relevant system review questions to determine presence/absence of any possible associated symptoms (see OSCEstop notes on systems review).

**For all symptoms also include time-frame**

- **Time-frame**
  - When it started
  - Acute/gradual onset
  - Duration
  - Progression
  - Intermittent or continuous

**Pain**

- **Pain (SOCRATES)**
  - Site
  - Onset
  - Character
  - Radiation
  - Associated symptoms (systems review)
  - Timing
  - Exacerbating/relieving factors
  - Severity

**Generalised symptoms**

- **Tiredness**
  - What they mean by tiredness
  - Their sleep pattern
  - How it affects patient
  - Anaemia Sx: breathlessness on exertion
  - Hypothyroidism Sx: constipation, weight gain, cold intolerance etc
  - Depression Sx: mood
  - Diabetes Sx: polydipsia, polyuria
  - Associated symptoms (systems review)

**Cerebral symptoms**

- **Headache**
  - Explode as pain
  - Meningismus symptoms: rash, fever, neck stiffness
  - Temporal arteritis symptoms: visual problems, jaw claudication, scalp tenderness
  - Glaucoma symptoms: visual problems, red eyes, halos around lights
  - Associated neurological symptoms (neurological systems review)
  - **Red flags:** meningismus (rash, fever, neck stiffness), temporal arteritis symptoms (visual problems, jaw claudication, scalp tenderness), glaucoma symptoms (visual problems, red eyes, halos around lights), focal neurology is covered in systems review

- **Weakness**
  - Pattern of weakness
  - Characterise weakness (e.g. fatigable?)
  - Associated neurological symptoms (neurological systems review)

- **Fit/fall/syncope**
  - **Before:** warning, circumstance
  - **During:** duration, LOC, movements (floppy/stiff/jerking), incontinence/bite tongue, complexion (GET CORROBORATION)
  - **After:** amnesia, muscle pain, confusion/sleepiness, injuries from fall
  - Background to attacks: had before, frequency, impact on life
  - Associated cardiorespiratory/neurological symptoms (systems review)
Chest symptoms

- SOB
  - Exertion tolerance, what makes them stop
  - Orthopnoea
  - Paroxysmal nocturnal dyspnoea
  - Diurnal/seasonal variation
  - Associated cardiorespiratory symptoms (cardiorespiratory systems review)

- Cough
  - Productive or non-productive
  - Triggers, nocturnal
  - Associated cardiorespiratory symptoms (cardiorespiratory systems review)

- Sputum
  - How much, how often
  - Colour, consistency
  - Any blood
  - Associated cardiorespiratory symptoms (cardiorespiratory systems review)

- Haemoptysis
  - Volume
  - Fresh or altered blood
  - Frequency
  - Nature of associated sputum if any? Mixed in?

- Palpitations
  - Fast or slow
  - Regular or irregular (get patient to tap out palpitation on table)
  - Any dizziness, LOC, nausea, sweating/clamminess, dyspnoea
  - Associated cardiorespiratory symptoms (cardiorespiratory systems review)

Abdomen symptoms

- Diarrhoea/constipation/vomiting
  - How much, how often, consistency
  - Colour & contents (mucus, blood, bile if vomiting)
  - Anorexia, weight loss, anaemia, diet
  - Associated gastrointestinal symptoms (gastrointestinal systems review)

- Dysphagia
  - Fluids/liquids/both, which came first
  - Constant/intermittent, progressive/non-progressive
  - Odynophagia
  - Weight loss, neurological deficits
  - Associated gastrointestinal symptoms (gastrointestinal systems review)

- Dyspepsia
  - Explode as pain
  - Associated gastrointestinal symptoms (gastrointestinal systems review)

  Red flags (ALARMS): Anaemia, Loss of weight, Anorexia, Recent onset progressive symptoms, Melaena, Swallowing difficulty

- Heartburn
  - Explode as pain
  - Associated gastrointestinal symptoms (gastrointestinal systems review)

  Red flags: weight loss, vomiting/haematemesis/melaena, dysphagia, >55years old, >4 weeks of/relapsing symptoms

Gynaecological symptoms

- Vaginal discharge
  - Amount
  - Colour (inc blood), odour, itching
  - Associated gynaecological symptoms (gynaecological systems review)

- Abnormal PV bleeding
  - Pattern: regular/irregular
  - Amount of loss: number of sanitary towels/tampons, passage of clots/flooding
  - Pain with blood loss, vaginal dryness and itching if post-menopausal
  - Anaemia symptoms: tiredness, breathlessness on exertion
  - Thyroid symptoms
  - Associated gynaecological symptoms (gynaecological systems review)

- Secondary amenorrhoea (work down the body)
  - General: weight loss, stress, exercise, diet
  - Head: visual problems, headaches
  - Thyroid: symptoms
  - Torso: galactorrhoea, hirsutism, acne
Abdomen: possibility of pregnancy

**Orthopaedic & rheumatological symptoms**

- **Back pain**
  - Explode as pain
  - Stiffness, deformity
  - Sciatica, incontinence
  - **Associated neurological symptoms** (neurological systems review)

  **Red flags:** age <20 or >55, acute onset in elderly, constant/progressive, nocturnal pain/morning stiffness, fever/night sweats/weight loss, cancer Hx, thoracic, bilateral/alternating, neurological/sphincter disturbance, leg claudication, recent infection, immunosupression, abdominal mass

- **Joint pain/stiffness/swelling**
  - Worse in morning?, how long for (30mins=inflammatory, 5mins=osteoarthritis)
  - Better or worse after exercise
  - Sleep disturbance
  - Loss of function
  - **Associated rheumatological symptoms** (rheumatological systems review)

- **Bone/tissue/joint injury**
  - Explode as pain
  - Stiffness/swelling
  - Movement restriction/ability to weight bear
  - Mechanical symptoms: locking, giving way
  - Neurological symptoms: weakness, numbness, paresthesia

**Psychiatric symptoms**

*NB. You must ask RISK in every psychiatric history*

- **Depression**
  - **Core:** mood, anhedonia
  - **Biological:** sleep, energy
  - **Future** (inc risk): hopelessness, suicidal thoughts
  - Others: Hx of mania/hypomania

- **Anxiety**
  - Timing: onset & duration, episodic/constant, triggers, effect on life, frequency, avoidance
  - Somatic symptoms: palpitations, breathlessness & tight chest, sweating, dizziness
  - Associated psychological symptoms: depression screen, stress, worry, avoidance
  - Psychiatric differential questions: obsessions, compulsions, PTSD Sx (psychological trauma, flashbacks, nightmares, hyperarousal)
  - Organic differential questions: e.g. hyperthyroidism, ACS

- **Auditory hallucinations**
  - Voice detail: male/female, recognise, always same, when etc
  - Real/pseudo: in/out of head
  - 1st/2nd/3rd person: to you/about you, comments
  - What they say (inc. commands)
  - Risk to self/others
  - **Associated psychiatric symptoms** (psychiatric systems review)

- **Delusions**
  - Challenge the delusion
  - Risk to self/others
  - **Associated psychiatric symptoms** (psychiatric systems review)

- **Memory loss**
  - Short/long term
  - Insight and concerns
  - Functional levels (washing, dressing etc)
  - Forgotten things that may put people at risk (e.g. gas stove)
  - Perform a MMSE

- **Eating disorder**
  - **BMI:** Weight & height
  - Symptoms: avoidance of weight gain/need to lose weight/look in mirror a lot, efforts to lose weight (vomiting, laxatives, exercise), binge eating/fasting
  - Food diary: what they eat each day
  - Results: menstrual cycle disturbance
  - Self harm & depression Sx
**Paediatric symptoms**

NB. most symptoms are exploded as you normally would for adults but some are specific...

- Diarrhoea and vomiting
  - As normal, but include hydration questions (wet nappies, drinking)

- Soiling/enuresis
  - Primary or secondary
  - Full account of toilet training
  - School toilet behaviour
  - Protest behaviour: stressful/chaotic life
  - If soiling, faeces consistency & any painful anal conditions
  - If secondary: urinary/GI infection symptoms, spinal cord compression symptoms (neuro sys review)

- Failure to thrive/ weight loss
  - Ask to see growth chart
  - Input: detailed dietary history, feeding history, hunger
  - Use: energy, activity level, exercise, anorexic?
  - Output: wet nappies, stools & GI symptoms
  - Others: behaviour, general health, happiness, parents health

- Weight gain
  - As failure to thrive plus...

- Hypothyroidism symptoms: tiredness/lethargy, constipation, cold intolerance, low mood

- Walking/sitting delay
  - Ages of milestones
  - How mobile?
  - Hand dominance
  - Balance problems
  - Behavioural problems
  - Associated neurological symptoms (neurological systems review)

- Speech delay
  - Ages of milestones
  - Senses: vocals, hearing, vision
  - Communication: comprehension (follows commands, responds to voice), non-verbal communication (pointing, gestures, facies), socially responses (how acts in new situations, tantrums, playing, gestures)

- Early puberty/late puberty/primary amenorrhoea/short stature
  - Pubertal development review (testes, breasts/menarche, pubic/axillary hair, height, acne, mood changes)
  - Intracranial pressure symptoms (visual problems, headaches)
  - Family pubertal/stature history
  - Symptoms of other systemic diseases (CF, thyroid, anorexia, Crohns)

- Behavioural disorder
  - ADHD symptoms: poor concentration, hyperactivity
  - Conduct disorder symptoms: hostile, aggressive, cruel
  - Autism symptoms: poor social interaction, emotionless, routines

**Other symptoms**

- Rash
  - Duration, progression, frequency
  - Where and what
  - Size and shape
  - Itchy/painful
  - Exacerbating/relieving factors e.g. heat, sunlight, cold, treatment
  - Associated rheumatological symptoms (rheumatological systems review)