

♥ ♥ ♥ June 22, 2008

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Our Parish Nurse ♥

6 Serious Medical Symptoms

Some medical symptoms are warnings that you need immediate care. Learn to recognize these six.

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WebMD Feature

Reviewed by Louise Chang, MD

Like red-light warnings on the dashboard, the human body sends out a flare when something's awry. Chest pain, shortness of breath, dizziness-- those are some familiar medical symptoms.

But other problems can creep up on you, too -- aches and pains, lumps and bumps. When are they important, when are they not?

In his book, *Your Body's Red Light Warning Signals*, Neil Shulman, MD, provides a head-to-toe owner's manual for the human body. His book lists hundreds of medical symptoms that could mean life or death, or serious disability.

Shulman, a professor of internal medicine at Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta, has authored numerous medical books and scientific papers.

It's serious stuff, stuff he likens to "terrorists inside our bodies," he tells WebMD. The symptoms are "killing way too many people. There's tremendous suffering and horrible death which could be avoided, but people don't know that something's wrong."

In fact, it happens all the time, a symptom is missed -- and it leads to a tragic ending. Or it's caught just in time, and a life is saved. Quite literally, it's that dramatic, Shulman tells WebMD.

Here are "six flags" -- six medical symptoms -- you should keep in mind:

1. If you have unexplained weight loss and/or loss of appetite, you may have a serious underlying medical illness.

"If you're on a diet, you're expecting this to happen. But if you're eating the same way -- and now have to adjust your belt a few notches tighter -- you could have a serious problem," Shulman says.

"With ovarian cancer, the opposite is true," he says. "Fluid builds in the abdomen, and women think they are gaining weight. But if you have been at the same weight range for years, and doing nothing different, see a doctor."

2. Slurred speech, paralysis, weakness, tingling, burning pains, numbness, and confusion are signs of a stroke, and you should get to an appropriate emergency center immediately. Early treatment may prevent permanent damage to the brain or even save your life.

Slurred speech can often go unnoticed, says Shulman. However, you might have a blood clot in a blood vessel in the brain or bleeding of a blood vessel.

3. Black, tarry stools may indicate a hemorrhage from an ulcer of the stomach or the small intestine. It is important to stop the bleeding and to rule out cancer as a cause.

