

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

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The cardiovascular system, also known as the circulatory system, plays a fundamental role in maintaining homeostasis by transporting oxygen, nutrients, hormones, and waste products throughout the body. The heart serves as the central organ of this system, acting as a pump that ensures continuous blood circulation. This paper provides an overview of the structure and function of the heart and cardiovascular system, discusses the physiological mechanisms that sustain circulation, and highlights the common disorders affecting cardiovascular health. Findings indicate that maintaining cardiovascular efficiency depends on lifestyle factors such as diet, exercise, and stress management. The study underscores the importance of cardiovascular education for disease prevention and overall well-being.

In the practice of clinical medicine, correctly interpreting what a patient brings to the consultation is fundamental. Two of the most important concepts are signs and symptoms. Though the two terms are often used interchangeably in everyday language, in medicine they bear distinct meanings — and understanding the difference helps healthcare providers to diagnose, treat, and communicate more effectively.

What are Symptoms?

Symptoms are the subjective experiences reported by the patient. They represent what the patient feels, experiences, or complains of. For example, when a patient says “I have a headache,” “I feel dizzy,” “I’m fatigued,” these are symptoms.

As the Cleveland Clinic defines: “Symptoms are things you feel but others may not always be able to see or measure.” Because symptoms depend on the patient's perception and ability to describe them, they can vary widely between individuals —even when they have the same disease.

What are Signs?

Signs, in contrast, are objective findings that can be observed, measured, or detected by someone other than the patient —typically a healthcare provider. Examples include raised temperature (fever), high blood pressure, a rash visible on the skin, abnormal heart sounds heard with a stethoscope, or an abnormal lab result. According to the National Library of Medicine,

“Objective evidence of disease perceptible to the examining practitioner (sign) and subjective evidence of disease perceived by the patient (symptom).”

In other words, signs are what the clinician sees, hears, measures, or reads from tests. They tend to be more reproducible,

less dependent on patient description, and thus can provide a firmer basis for diagnosis.

Key Differences and Clinical Importance

The fundamental distinction is who detects the phenomenon:

- A symptom is detected by the patient.
- A sign is detected by someone else (clinician) or by objective measurement.

For example:

- A patient complaining of “feeling cold all the time” is reporting a symptom.
- The clinician measuring the patient’s body temperature and finding 38.5 °C is documenting a sign.

Sometimes, a finding may be both a symptom and a sign: if a rash is visible and the patient noticed it, then the rash is both their symptom and the clinician’s sign.

Why does this distinction matter?

1. Diagnosis — Clinicians use both symptoms and signs together to form a complete picture.

Symptoms provide the narrative; signs provide the objective clues. For instance, back pain (symptom) plus neurological weakness on examination (sign) may point to a disc herniation.

2. Communication — When healthcare professionals communicate their findings, distinguishing signs vs symptoms helps in clarity: “the patient reports symptom X” vs “on examination, sign Y was noted.”

3. Documentation and research — In clinical records, symptoms are often recorded as part of the “history” while signs are recorded

under “examination” or “investigations.” In research, objective signs are easier to quantify and compare.

4. Monitoring and prognosis — Some signs may indicate disease severity or progression even before the patient feels symptoms (for example, high blood pressure may be asymptomatic).

Summary

In brief, while both signs and symptoms reflect that “something is wrong” in the body, they differ in who observes them and how they are detected.

Symptoms = what the patient feels. Signs = what the clinician finds (or what tests reveal). Recognising and documenting both is essential for good medical care.

References

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