

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SIGN AND SYMPTOM

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Medical diagnosis is a process that relies on information obtained from the patient and the findings observed by the physician. Two fundamental concepts in medicine—signs and symptoms—play a crucial role in understanding, identifying, and managing diseases. This article explains the differences between signs and symptoms, their subjective and objective nature, and their importance in clinical practice.

Introduction: The Foundations of Semiology.

Medical semiology is the study of disease signs, beginning with the distinction between symptoms and signs. Although these terms are often confused in clinical practice, the difference between them is fundamental. A symptom is an internal manifestation of a disease, while a sign is its external and measurable evidence. Research shows that approximately 80% of an accurate diagnosis relies on the correct collection and analysis of these two types of information.

The Nature of Symptoms (Subjective Experience)

Definition: Symptoms are subjective sensations perceived only by the patient and communicated verbally to others. They cannot be directly observed from the outside or measured using instruments.

Neurobiological Basis: Symptoms arise from the processing of sensory impulses in the cerebral cortex. For example, pain (dolor) is a signal of the somatosensory system resulting from the brain's interpretation of sensory input.

Clinical Significance: Symptoms form a crucial part of the patient's medical history (anamnesis). They provide the physician with information about the course of the disease, timing of exacerbations, and the patient's psychological state.

Examples:

1. Pain: The patient experiences a sharp stabbing sensation in the lower back.
2. Nausea: An unpleasant feeling in the stomach before vomiting.
3. Vertigo: A sensation of imbalance or spinning.
4. Fatigue: A lack of energy or excessive tiredness.

Objective Evidence:

A sign is an objective indicator of a disease. It can be detected by a physician through physical examination, laboratory tests, or other diagnostic tools. Unlike symptoms, signs do not depend on the patient's subjective feelings and can be independently observed or measured.

For example, fever reflects the body's immune response, hypertension indicates measurable cardiovascular changes, and swelling (edema) shows fluid accumulation in tissues along with visible changes in the skin.

Objective signs are essential in clinical diagnosis because they help confirm the patient's reported symptoms, monitor disease progression, and evaluate the effectiveness of treatment.

Examples: fever, rash, high blood pressure, swelling (edema).

Synesthetic Overlap: The Intersection of Symptoms and Signs.

In some clinical situations, a condition can be classified as both a symptom and a sign simultaneously.

Shortness of Breath (Dyspnea): The patient complains of “difficulty breathing” (symptom), while the physician observes the use of accessory muscles during respiration (sign).

Cough: The patient reports coughing (symptom), and during examination, the physician detects a productive cough with phlegm (sign).

Asymptomatic Diseases. Some diseases do not produce noticeable symptoms, making them difficult to detect without clinical examination or diagnostic tests. These asymptomatic conditions may still show objective signs or changes in the body, even though the patient feels well.

Examples:

1. **Hypertension (High Blood Pressure):** Often called the “silent killer,” it usually has no symptoms but can be detected through measurement.
2. **Diabetes (Early Stages):** Blood sugar levels may be elevated without obvious symptoms initially.
3. **Hyperlipidemia (High Cholesterol):** Patients may feel healthy, but laboratory tests reveal dangerous lipid levels.
4. **Early-stage Cancer:** Tumors may grow without causing pain or discomfort, requiring imaging or screenings for detection.

Clinical Importance: Asymptomatic diseases highlight the necessity of regular check-ups, preventive screenings, and laboratory tests. Detecting these conditions early can prevent serious complications and improve treatment outcomes.

Conclusion: Understanding the distinction between symptoms, signs, and asymptomatic conditions is fundamental in medical practice. Symptoms provide subjective insight into the patient’s experience, while signs offer objective evidence that can be observed or measured by the physician. Some conditions may present both simultaneously, and others may remain asymptomatic, emphasizing the importance of thorough examinations, diagnostic tests, and preventive screenings. A proper understanding and analysis of these clinical indicators ensure accurate diagnosis, effective treatment, and improved patient care.

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