

Red Flags for Potential Serious Conditions in Patients with Neck and Shoulder Problems

Red Flags for the Neck and Shoulder Region		
Condition	Red Flag Data obtained during Interview/History	Red Flag Data obtained during Physical Exam
Cervical Fractures or Ligamentous Instabilities ¹⁻⁶	Major trauma such as a motor vehicle accident or a fall from a height with associated immediate onset of neck pain Rheumatoid arthritis or Down's syndrome	Midline cervical spine tenderness Positive ligamentous integrity tests: Sharp-Purser test Alar ligament integrity test Apprehension with or inability to actively rotate head < 45°
Cervical Central Cord Lesion ⁷⁻⁹	Older age History of a trauma (esp. MVA or fall) Incontinence	Gait disturbances due to hyperreflexic lower extremities Upper extremity (especially hand) sensory and motor deficits, and atrophy
Pancoast tumor ¹⁰⁻¹²	Men over 50 with a history of cigarette smoking. "Nagging" type pain in the shoulder and along the vertebral border of the scapula – often progressing to burning pain down the arm into the ulnar nerve distribution.	Wheezing with auscultation when tumor obstructs bronchus May have Horner's syndrome Ptosis (drooping eyelid) Constricted pupil Sweating disturbances
Septic Arthritis (A-C Joint) ¹³	Insidious onset of chest pain localized in the S-C joint History of IV drug use, diabetes, trauma, infection (especially of central venous access)	Tender S-C joint Limited shoulder movement Swelling over S-C joint Fever

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