

Investigation

2.1: Chief Complaint

Almost every patient comes to you having a “Chief Complaint”. The **Chief Complaint (CC)** is the main problem the patient is concerned about. It may involve pain or a change in the way they feel, or sometimes simple a question or fear about something they heard. Not all patients have a chief complaint; a patient may come to you to have a routine physical exam to assess their current health status. Sometimes patients have more than one complaint, or even a list of complaints. Any complaints after the main or Chief Complaint are considered **Secondary Complaints**. Your first challenge is to investigate the Chief Complaint. After you investigate the Chief Complaint you can then investigate any Secondary Complaints.

When investigating the Chief Complaint you learn as much as possible from the patient. Some patients are better than others describing their complaints. You ask lots of questions to get more information, such as:

- What seems to be the problem?
- When did you first notice this problem?
- What makes it feel better?
- What makes you feel worse?
- Is the problem always in the same place or does it move around?
- What have you tried already before coming here?
- Is the problem constant or does it come and go?
- Is the problem getting better, worse, or staying the same?
- What activities **exacerbate** the problem?
- Does anyone else in your family have this problem?

These are important questions whose answers may guide your investigation. After asking questions you should have a good idea about your patient’s **symptoms**. Symptoms are important clues about what the patient is feeling. The answers should tell you if the problem is **acute** or **chronic**, and may even set your brain in motion to begin your **differential diagnosis**, a list of possible causes for this complaint. The answers may tell you where to focus your physical examination.