

Red Flags Quick Reference

RED FLAGS QUICK REFERENCE

When to STOP Typing and Call 911

CRITICAL PRINCIPLE

Some symptoms are “call 911 immediately,” not “ask AI.”

If you have ANY of these symptoms, STOP using AI and seek immediate medical attention.

AI cannot assess emergency situations remotely. AI cannot examine you. AI cannot detect how sick you look.

When in doubt, call 911. Better to be wrong about an emergency than dead because you delayed.

CARDIAC (HEART) RED FLAGS

Call 911 IMMEDIATELY if you have:

Chest pain/pressure/discomfort PLUS any of: Sweating (diaphoresis)

- Shortness of breath
- Nausea or vomiting
- Pain radiating to arm, jaw, neck, back, or shoulder
- Sense of impending doom
- Lightheadedness or dizziness

Additional cardiac emergencies: Chest pain lasting more than 15 minutes

- Chest pain with known cardiac risk factors (family history, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, smoking)
- Sudden severe fatigue with chest discomfort
- Irregular heartbeat with lightheadedness

Remember: Women and diabetics may have atypical presentations (fatigue, nausea, back pain without classic chest pain)

NEUROLOGICAL (BRAIN/NERVE) RED FLAGS

STROKE - Use FAST:

- F**ace drooping (one side)
- A**rm weakness (one side)
- S**peech difficulty (slurred, can't speak)
- T**ime to call 911 (IMMEDIATELY)

Other neurological emergencies:

- "Worst headache of my life"** (thunderclap headache)
 - Sudden severe headache with stiff neck
 - Sudden vision loss or double vision
 - Sudden confusion or inability to understand speech
 - Sudden severe dizziness or loss of balance
 - Seizure (first-time or prolonged)
 - Loss of consciousness or unresponsiveness
 - Sudden weakness or numbness (especially one-sided)
 - Difficulty walking or coordinating movements
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ABDOMINAL (BELLY) RED FLAGS

Call 911 if you have:

- Severe abdominal pain with fever
 - Rigid, board-like abdomen
 - Abdominal pain with pregnancy (any trimester)
 - Vomiting blood or "coffee grounds" material
 - Black, tarry stools (melena)
 - Bright red blood in stool
 - Severe abdominal pain that suddenly improves (may indicate perforation)
 - Abdominal pain with lightheadedness or fainting
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RESPIRATORY (BREATHING) RED FLAGS

Call 911 if you experience:

- Cannot speak in full sentences
 - Gasping for air
 - Blue or gray lips, face, or fingernails (cyanosis)
 - Severe shortness of breath at rest
 - Stridor (high-pitched breathing sound)
 - Using neck muscles to breathe (accessory muscle use)
 - Chest pain with shortness of breath
 - Sudden severe shortness of breath
 - Shortness of breath with leg swelling
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PEDIATRIC (CHILDREN) RED FLAGS

Call 911 for infants (<3 months) if:

- Fever (temperature $\geq 100.4^{\circ}\text{F}$ / 38°C)
- Not feeding or eating
- Not responding normally
- Difficult to wake
- Breathing problems
- Blue/gray skin color

Call 911 for any child if:

- Difficulty breathing or rapid breathing
- Blue or gray lips/face
- Unresponsive or difficult to wake
- Severe headache with stiff neck
- Seizure
- Signs of severe dehydration (no tears, no urine for 8+ hours, sunken eyes)
- Severe abdominal pain
- Won't eat or drink anything

TRUST PARENTAL INSTINCT:

If your gut says your child is seriously ill, call 911.

Maternal/paternal instinct is evolutionary threat detection debugged over millions of years. If something feels wrong, it probably is.

OTHER CRITICAL RED FLAGS

Allergic Reaction (Anaphylaxis):

- Difficulty breathing or throat swelling
- Rapid swelling of face, lips, or tongue
- Widespread hives with breathing difficulty
- Sudden drop in blood pressure (lightheadedness, fainting)

Trauma/Injury:

- Severe bleeding that won't stop with pressure
- Suspected spinal injury
- Severe head trauma with loss of consciousness
- Suspected fracture with deformity
- Deep wounds exposing bone or muscle

Poisoning/Overdose:

- Loss of consciousness after ingestion
- Difficulty breathing after exposure
- Seizures after ingestion
- Confusion or altered mental status

Mental Health Emergencies:

- Immediate suicidal thoughts with plan
- Homicidal thoughts
- Complete detachment from reality

- Severe acute psychosis
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BACK PAIN RED FLAGS

Call 911 or go to ER if back pain PLUS:

- Bowel or bladder dysfunction (loss of control, retention, incontinence)
- Saddle anesthesia (numbness in groin/inner thighs)
- Progressive leg weakness
- Bilateral leg symptoms
- Foot drop
- Fever

This could be cauda equina syndrome—a neurosurgical emergency requiring immediate surgery to prevent permanent paralysis.

WHAT AI CANNOT DETECT

Remember: AI cannot remotely assess:

Visual cues: - Skin color (pale, gray, blue, mottled) - Facial expression of distress - Respiratory effort - Level of consciousness

Physical findings: - Diaphoresis (sweating) - Perfusion status - Capillary refill - Quality of pulses

Vital signs: - Blood pressure - Heart rate - Respiratory rate - Temperature - Oxygen saturation

Clinical gestalt: - “Looks sick” - Degree of distress - Mental status changes - Subtle neurological findings

If AI lists these as things it cannot detect, and you have concerning symptoms, seek evaluation regardless of AI’s general advice.

THE DECISION RULE

When to call 911:

- Any symptom on this list
- Sudden severe onset of any symptom
- Symptoms that are rapidly worsening
- Multiple concerning symptoms together
- Your gut tells you this is an emergency

When to go to ER (drive or have someone drive you):

- Concerning symptoms but stable
- Symptoms on this list but not immediately life-threatening

- Need evaluation within hours, not days

When to call your doctor's office:

- Concerning symptoms but not on this list
- Symptoms that can wait until office hours
- Follow-up on known conditions
- Questions about treatment plans

When you can use AI:

- General health education
 - Understanding diagnosed conditions
 - Preparing for appointments
 - Learning about medications
 - Clarifying doctor's instructions
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REMEMBER

Time matters in emergencies.

Every minute counts in: - Heart attacks - Strokes - Severe bleeding - Anaphylaxis - Trauma

Don't delay care to research symptoms online or ask AI.

If you're reading this list wondering if your symptoms count as an emergency:

They probably do. Call 911.

FALSE POSITIVES ARE OKAY

The velociraptor test: Our ancestors who had false alarms and ran from nothing survived. Our ancestors who ignored real threats died.

Better to: - Call 911 and be told it's not an emergency - Go to the ER and be sent home - "Overreact" and be embarrassed

Than to: - Delay care and suffer permanent damage - Wait too long and die - Ignore red flags and lose critical treatment time

ER doctors would rather see you for nothing than have you die at home.

WHAT TO DO WHILE WAITING FOR 911

DO: - Stay calm - Stay with patient - Keep patient comfortable - Note time symptoms started - Gather medications/medical history - Unlock doors for paramedics - Have someone meet ambulance outside

DON'T: - Give anything by mouth if patient has altered consciousness
- Leave patient alone - Drive yourself to hospital if having cardiac or neurological symptoms - Delay calling 911 to "see if it gets better"

TRUST YOUR GUT

Your velociraptor brain is debugged by 3.8 billion years of evolution.

AI's pattern recognition is debugged by... training on text.

If your evolutionary threat detection says something is seriously wrong:

Listen to it. Call 911.

Print this guide. Keep it visible. When seconds count, you don't want to be searching for this information.

**From: AI in the Exam Room - Patient Education Curriculum
Module 3: Red Flags - When to Stop Typing and Call 911**

For emergencies in the United States, call 911

For poison emergencies, call 1-800-222-1222

For suicide prevention, call 988