

Head to Toe Assessment

Introduction

Organization is key to a good comprehensive head to toe assessment. A systematic approach will maximize the patient's comfort, avoid unnecessary position changes, and enhance clinical efficiency. In general, a head-to-toe approach is the most effective way to ensure you complete a thorough examination; however, rectal, and genital examinations are often performed at the end.

Positioning of the patient may need to be adapted based on the setting or any limitations or contraindications. Use caution with position changes.

General Survey

- Observe the patient's general state of health and note posture, motor activity, grooming and hygiene.
- Perform a [pain assessment](#).
- Obtain the patient's height and weight. Calculate the [body mass index](#).

Patient seated, clinician facing patient

Vital signs

- Measure blood pressure, heart rate, respiratory rate, and temperature.
- Obtain pulse oximetry measurement, if indicated.

Skin

- Observe the skin of the face.
- Continue your [integumentary assessment](#) as you examine the other regions of the body.

Head, eyes, ears, nose, and throat

- Examine the hair, scalp, skull, and face.
- Check visual acuity and fields. Note the alignment of the eyes and inspect the sclerae and conjunctivae. Test pupillary response and assess extraocular movements. Use an [ophthalmoscope](#) to inspect the fundi.
- Inspect the ear auricles, canals, and drums. Check auditory acuity (if diminished, perform the [Weber test and Rinne test](#)).
- Examine the external nose and the mucosa, septum, and turbinates. Palpate the sinuses.
- Inspect the lips, oral mucosa, gums, palate, teeth, tonsils, and pharynx.
- Assess the [cranial nerves](#).

Neck

- Inspect and palpate the cervical lymph nodes.
- Feel for deviation of the trachea.

Patient seated, clinician behind patient

Neck

- Inspect and palpate the thyroid gland.

Back/Posterior thorax and lungs

- Inspect and palpate the spine and back muscles.
- Inspect, palpate, and percuss the chest (identify dullness of the diaphragm).
- Listen to breath sounds.

Patient seated, clinician facing patient

**You may want to assess upper extremity muscles and reflexes at this time.*

Breasts and axillae

- Perform [breast assessment](#), first with the patient seated and then with the patient supine.

Patient supine, head of bed 30°

Anterior thorax and lungs

- Complete your [pulmonary assessment](#) by inspecting, palpating, and percussing across the chest. Then auscultate noting any [abnormal breath sounds](#).

Cardiovascular system

- Measure jugular venous pressure and inspect and palpate the carotid arteries; listen for [bruits](#).
- Perform a complete [cardiac assessment](#), including inspection and palpation of the precordium, and auscultation of heart sounds.
- Palpate the [radial and brachial pulses](#).

Patient supine, head of bed flat

Abdomen

- The order for [gastrointestinal assessment](#) is inspection, auscultation, percussion, light palpation, deep palpation.
- Assess the liver and the spleen using percussion, then palpation.

Lower extremities

- Palpate the [femoral and popliteal pulses](#), and the inguinal lymph nodes.
- Inspect the lower extremities for edema, discoloration, ulcers, and varicose veins.
- Assess lower extremity muscles and [reflexes](#).

Patient standing

Musculoskeletal system

- Examine the alignment of the spine, legs, and feet; assess range of motion.

Patient seated

Nervous system

- Complete any additional components of the [neurologic assessment](#) by assessing mental status, cranial nerves, motor system, sensory system, and reflexes.

Genital and rectal examinations

- Genital examinations are typically performed at the end of the physical assessment.
 - [Male genitourinary assessment](#)
 - [Female genitourinary assessment](#)
 - [Digital rectal exam](#)

PEARLS

- Do your best to ensure an environment that is quiet with good lighting.
- Be sensitive to privacy and patient modesty.
- Keep the patient informed as you move through the assessment.

References

Bickley, L. S., Szilagyi, P. G., Hoffman, R. M., & Soriano, R. P. (2021). *Bate's Guide to Physical Examination and History Taking* (13th ed.). Wolters Kluwer Health: Philadelphia.

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