

THE POWER OF TOUCH

Although laboratory tests and medical imaging are increasingly important diagnostic tools in medicine, physical examinations remain an important part of medical practice.

Medical professionals are trained to use a variety of hands-on techniques during physical examinations. Remember that you have the right to ask about what the provider is doing and why at any time. Common examination techniques include:



INSPECTION

The provider carefully assesses the patient, looking for normal condition and irregularities. The provider may lightly hold, turn or adjust the part of the body he or she is examining. Inspection can help identify swelling, inflammation, muscle tone, bruising, cuts, lumps or other abnormalities.





PALPATION

The provider uses his or her hands to press and feel part of the patient's body to look for masses or lumps. Areas of the body commonly examined with this technique include the neck (lymph nodes), chest and abdomen.



PERCUSSION

This is just what it sounds like – tapping fingers, hands or small instruments against parts of the patient's body. This is done to identify the size and position of organs or masses, and to detect the presence or absence of fluids in the body. This information may help the provider reach a diagnosis.



AUSCULTATION

The word is strange, but the technique – using a stethoscope to listen to various body systems – is immediately recognizable. Parts of the body commonly examined with a stethoscope include the chest and back (listening for heart and lung function), neck (blood flow) and even abdomen (bowel sounds).