

Chapter 15

Red Flag Signs and Symptoms

Red flag signs and symptoms in the context of lower back pain are signs and symptoms that should prompt further investigation.

Red flag signs and symptoms and what they may indicate include the following:

Fever—risk of infection.

Chills—risk of infection

Recent unexplained weight loss—potential for malignancy

Saddle anesthesia—concern for cauda equina syndrome

Urinary or bowel incontinence—concern for cauda equina syndrome or spinal cord lesion

Progressive weakness or numbness—concern for nerve damage

Any history of cancer, IV drug abuse, HIV, prolonged use of corticosteroids, or other causes of immunosuppression should prompt concern for infection or malignancy and warrant further study depending on the clinical scenario.

History of recent travel to a location with a high incidence of tuberculosis should prompt consideration of tuberculosis in the spine (Pott disease).

Pain that is severe at nighttime and better with activity and during the day may prompt concern for a malignancy depending on the clinical scenario.

Axial lower back and buttock pain in a young male that is much worse in the morning and includes excessive stiffness that can last for over an hour in the morning should prompt concern for ankylosing spondylitis.