

Common Medical Mimics and Screening Recommendations

Category	Psychiatric Symptoms	Other Clinical Symptoms	Suggestions for Evaluation*
Cardiovascular			
Cerebrovascular accident (CVA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Altered mental status (AMS) Mood and behavioral changes (eg, depression associated with right hemispheric infarct) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hypertension Sudden difficulties with speech Sudden numbness or weakness Sudden trouble with vision or coordination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Head CT Specific physical exam findings such as numbness, weakness or paralysis on one side of the body, cardiovascular risk factors**
Hypertensive emergencies (>180/120 mmHg)	AMS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dyspnea Headache Nausea Organ damage Vomiting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Blood pressure greater than 180/120 EKG Head CT
Myocardial infarction (MI) or acute coronary syndrome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anxiety (can be silent ischemia with only weakness and loss of appetite) Behavioral changes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dyspnea Nausea Palpitations and chest discomfort Radiation of pain Syncope Vomiting Weakness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cardiovascular risk factors** ECG Prior history of MI Troponins
Central Nervous System			
Neoplasms	<p>Frontal lobe:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> AMS Behavioral changes Executive dysfunction <p>Temporal or limbic lobe:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Auditory, visual hallucinations Panic attacks Psychosis 	<p>Highly variable symptoms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fatigue Focal deficits Headache Increased intracranial pressure with vision changes Rapid weight loss Seizures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brain MRI Cancer history Neurological exam
Occult head injury	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> AMS Behavioral changes Concentration and memory difficulties Irritability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Headache Nausea Other concussive symptoms Seizures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fall risk factors such as visual impairments, being on sedating medications, alcohol or substance usage Head CT
Subdural hemorrhage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acute behavioral changes AMS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coma Focal neurological signs Large hematoma, fractures Seizures <p>Depending on lobe:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ataxia Headache Hemiparesis Speech impairment Vomiting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Non-contrast head CT Risk factors such as cerebral atrophy, being on anticoagulation, coagulopathies, high fall risk (see below)

Common Medical Mimics and Screening Recommendations			
Category	Psychiatric Symptoms	Other Clinical Symptoms	Suggestions for Evaluation*
Drugs/Substance Use			
Alcohol and benzodiazepine withdrawal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> AMS Anxiety Hallucinations and psychosis Insomnia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Autonomic instability Headache Seizures Tremor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alcohol and substance use screening (eg, CAGE; AUDIT-C; ASSIST) ETOH level Liver function tests Urine toxicology screen
Allergy/cold medicine (eg, phenylephrine and other alpha-1-agonists; diphenhydramine and other H1-antihistamines)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> AMS Hallucinations and delusions at higher dosages Sedation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Blurred vision Constipation Dry mouth Tachycardia Urinary retention 	Medication reconciliation including over-the-counter (OTC) medications
Antiemetics (eg, metoclopramide and other dopamine-receptor antagonists)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Akathisia/restlessness Depression Fatigue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Blood pressure changes Diarrhea Drug-induced movement disorders 	Medication reconciliation specifically looking at regimen used for GI symptoms
Neuroleptic Malignant Syndrome	AMS (eg, confusion, catatonia, mutism)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Autonomic instability Hyperthermia “Lead pipe” rigidity 	<p>This is a clinical diagnosis based on physical exam and history:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elevated creatine kinase may be present Look for recent exposure to a dopamine antagonist or dopamine agonist withdrawal Rule out alternative cause of delirium
Serotonin Syndrome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agitation Akathisia/restlessness AMS Insomnia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diaphoresis Hyperreflexia Hyperthermia Ocular clonus Spontaneous clonus Tremor 	<p>Clinical diagnosis based on physical exam and history:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can use Hunter Criteria Medication reconciliation specifically looking at serotonergic agents Rule out alternative causes of delirium
Steroids (chronic use)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> AMS Emotional and mood lability Psychosis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acne GI upset Hair loss Headache Hypertension 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anabolic steroid testing (not part of general urine toxicology screen) Medication reconciliation (including non-prescribed medications)
Stimulants (eg, amphetamine; methylphenidate; ephedrine; cocaine)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agitation Anxiety Confusion Insomnia Irritability Paranoia and delusions Restlessness Suicidal ideation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decreased appetite Headache Hypertension Tachycardia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Medication reconciliation (including non-prescribed medications) Urine toxicology screen

Common Medical Mimics and Screening Recommendations			
Category	Psychiatric Symptoms	Other Clinical Symptoms	Suggestions for Evaluation*
Electrolyte Imbalances			
Hypercalcemia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confusion and poor concentration • Fatigue • Stupor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anorexia • Bradycardia • Coma • Muscle weakness • Nausea • Polydipsia • Polyuria • Vomiting 	Risk factors such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Malignancy • Usage of thiazide drugs
Hyperglycemia	AMS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blurry vision • Polyuria • Thirst • Weight loss 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Glucose check • HbA1c • Risk factors such as diabetes and alcohol usage
Hypernatremia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lethargy • Irritability • Restlessness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coma • Muscle weakness • Seizure • Thirst • Twitching 	Risk factors such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical illness • Diarrhea • Diuretic therapy • Uncontrolled diabetes • Underlying polyuria disorders
Hypocalcemia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AMS • Anxiety • Depression 	Motor abnormalities such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seizures • Twitching 	Risk factors such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical illness • Inadequate parathyroid hormone (PTH) secretion or PTH resistance • Renal disease • Vitamin D deficiency
Hypoglycemia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AMS • Anxiety • Behavioral changes • Psychomotor abnormalities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diaphoresis • Drowsiness • Hunger and weight gain • Palpitations • Paresthesia • Transient neurologic deficits • Tremor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Glucose check • Risk factors such as misuse of insulin, diabetes, alcohol usage, insulinemia, critical illness
Hyponatremia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AMS • Forgetfulness • Lethargy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coma • Dizziness • Forgetfulness • Gait disturbance • Headache • Muscle cramps or weakness • Nausea • Seizure • Vomiting 	Risk factors such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drinking too much water • Heart failure • Kidney disease • Liver disease • Poor diet • SIADH

Common Medical Mimics and Screening Recommendations

Category	Psychiatric Symptoms	Other Clinical Symptoms	Suggestions for Evaluation*
Endocrine			
Adrenal insufficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AMS • Depression • Fatigue • Poor appetite 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abdominal pain • Coma • Fatigue • Fever • Lethargy • Nausea • Vomiting 	Serum cortisol and ACTH stimulation tests
Hyperthyroidism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety • Emotional and mood lability • Insomnia • Hyperactivity and restlessness • Rapid speech • Weakness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diaphoresis • Edema • Heat intolerance • Increased appetite • Menstrual disorders • Palpitations • Shortness of breath • Tremor • Weight loss 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate size of thyroid/presence of goiter • TSH with reflex testing
Hypothyroidism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AMS • Depression • Fatigue • Psychomotor retardation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arthralgias • Cognitive dysfunction • Cold intolerance • Decreased hearing • Growth failure • Weight gain 	TSH with reflex testing
Meningitis	AMS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coma • Fever • Headache • Nuchal rigidity • Nerve palsy • Rash • Seizure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blood culture • Head imaging if clinically indicated • Lumbar puncture for CSF culture
Pneumonia	AMS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cough • Crackles and rhonchi • Dyspnea • Fever • Hypoxemia • Tachycardia • Tachypnea 	CXR
Urinary tract infection (UTI)	AMS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acute dysuria • Fever • Hematuria • Suprapubic or costovertebral angle tenderness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leukocytosis • UA and urine culture

Common Medical Mimics and Screening Recommendations			
Category	Psychiatric Symptoms	Other Clinical Symptoms	Suggestions for Evaluation*
Pulmonary			
Carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confusion and poor concentration • Irritability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dizziness, weakness • Dyspnea • Headache • Nausea 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carbon monoxide blood test • Risk factors such as winter, gas heaters or portable generators, poorly ventilated appliances
Pneumothorax or COPD exacerbation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AMS • Panic attacks and anxiety 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pleuritic chest pain • Sudden dyspnea or dyspnea at rest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in sputum or baseline breathing patterns for COPD patients • CXR • Home oxygen usage • Smoking history
Pulmonary embolism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety • Apprehension • Feeling of doom 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calf/thigh pain, +/- swelling • Cough • Hemoptysis • Orthopnea • Pleuritic pain • Tachycardia, dyspnea 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chest CT scan • Risk factors such as hypercoagulable state, recent surgeries, prolonged immobilization, trauma, cancer, or family history

*All evaluations include the basic screening recommendations, as well as psychiatric and medical history, and medication reconciliation.

**Common cardiovascular risk factors include hypertension, hyperlipidemia, diabetes, chronic kidney disease, lifestyle factors such as unhealthy diet and physical inactivity, smoking, obesity

From the Article:
“Medical Mimics in Geriatric Psychiatry”
 by **Miranda Tsang** and
Julia Cromwell, MD

The Carlat Geriatric Psychiatry Report, Volume 2, Number 5&6, July 2023
www.thecarlatreport.com