

Head, Eyes, Ears, Nose, Throat (HEENT) Assessment

Introduction

Most physical assessments begin at the top with the head, eyes, ears, nose, and throat (HEENT) assessment. The patient is typically positioned sitting upright, allowing the examiner to systemically work downwards through each body system. For hospitalized or bedridden patients who cannot sit upright, a thorough assessment will require turning the patient to adequately assess the back of the head. Some body system evaluations may overlap. For example, the [cranial nerve assessments](#) outlined below are also elements of a detailed [neurologic assessment](#).

Assessing the Head

- Inspect the head and face for symmetry. Observe for facial skin conditions, facial fullness or swelling, and abnormal or excessive facial hair in females.
- Inspect the hair for color, distribution, and texture.
- Inspect the scalp for wounds, lesions, parasites, and patterns of hair loss. Systematically part the hair in order to fully assess all areas of the scalp.
- Palpate the scalp and skull for tenderness and inspect for flaking, lesions, deformities, or tenderness.

Assessing the Eyes

- Note the position and alignment of the eyes and the presence of discharge, irritation, and redness.
- Observe the eyelids.
 - Check for drooping of the upper eyelids (ptosis).
 - Check the strength of the upper eyelids by having the patient squeeze their eyes shut. You should not be able to open the patient's eyelids ([cranial nerve VII](#)).
- Inspect the sclera and conjunctiva of each eye; sclerae should be white and clear.
- Inspect each cornea, iris, and lens, checking for transparency.
- Compare the pupils and test each for reaction to light.
 - Pupils are normally round and may vary in size but should be symmetrical
 - Use the mnemonic PERRLA (Pupils Equal, Round, and Reactive to Light and Accommodation) to test pupil reflexes.
 - Test for reactivity to light.
 - Darken the room and shine a flashlight on each pupil. Normally, pupils constrict with light and dilate in the dark.
 - Test for accommodation (the ability of the lens to adjust to objects at varying distances).
 - When moving an object close to the eye, the pupil will constrict; when moving an object away from the eye, the pupil will dilate.
- Assess extraocular movements for abnormalities.
 - Assess the 6 cardinal positions of the gaze: right, right up, right down, left, left up, left down.
 - Check for conjugate gaze (the ability of the eyes to move in the same direction at the same time). Eyes normally move in unison, except when converging on an object that is moving closer.

- Check for nystagmus, a condition in which the eyes move rapidly and uncontrollably in a rhythmic motion side to side (horizontal nystagmus), up and down (vertical nystagmus), or in a circle (rotary nystagmus). This may be seen on lateral movement due to eye fatigue; watch for vertical nystagmus or prolonged nystagmus.
- Screen visual fields in both eyes: medially/laterally, superiorly/inferiorly ([cranial nerve II](#)).
- Perform a visual acuity test with the Snellen Chart ([cranial nerve II](#)). If the patient usually wears eyeglasses or contact lenses, they should be worn for the examination.
- For fundoscopic examination, use an ophthalmoscope to inspect the ocular fundi.
 - Check for transparency of the anterior and posterior chambers.
 - Observe the red reflex of the retina; it can be observed by the clinician 1 foot from the eye in a dimly lit room.

Assessing the Ears

- Examine each ear using an otoscope. Gently pull the pinna of the ear up and back to straighten the external canal.
 - Inspect the auricle, canal, and eardrum for color, symmetry, elasticity, tenderness, or lesions.
 - Inspect the external ear canal for color, drainage, cerumen (ear wax) buildup, canal edema, erythema, masses or foreign bodies.
 - Assess the tympanic membrane for color, shape, transparency, integrity, cone of light, boney land markings, bulging, and scarring.
- Test auditory acuity in each ear with the whisper test ([cranial nerve VIII](#)).
 - Stand about 2 feet behind the seated patient.
 - Occlude the non-test ear with a finger.
 - Whisper a combination of three words including numbers and letters and then ask the patient to repeat them back to you.
 - If acuity is decreased, perform the Weber (lateralization) and Rinne (bone conduction) tests ([cranial nerve VIII](#)).
 - Annual audiometry hearing tests are recommended for patients aged 60 and older.

Assessing the Nose and Sinuses

- Inspect the external nose for color, size, shape, symmetry, and presence of drainage, tenderness, and masses.
- Using a light and a nasal speculum or otoscope, inspect the nasal passages for patency, nasal mucosa for color, nasal septum for deviation, and turbinate for color and swelling.
- Check the patency of each nares by asking the patient to occlude one nare and breathe through the other.
- Assess the patient's sense of smell ([cranial nerve I](#)) with an orange or lemon peel, coffee, vinegar, or essence bottles of vanilla or peppermint.
- Palpate the frontal and maxillary sinuses for tenderness and assess for signs of infection.

Assessing the Throat (Mouth and Pharynx)

- Inspect:
 - Lips for color, moisture, masses, cracks, sores, fissures, and symmetry.
 - Oral mucosa for color, lesions, dryness/moisture, masses, and swelling.

- Tongue for color, thickness, moisture, symmetry of movement left and right, and deviations from midline ([cranial nerve XII](#)). Palpate the tongue and floor of the mouth for masses and swelling.
- Teeth for their general condition and determine if any are missing.
- Gums for color, texture, swelling, retraction, and bleeding.
- Uvula for movement, position, size, symmetry, and color.
- Pharynx (hard and soft palate) for color, redness, inflammation, exudate, masses, and lesions.
- Tonsils for size, color, inflammation, and exudate.
- Salivary glands (parotid, sublingual, and submaxillary) for patency and signs of inflammation or redness.
- Check the patient's ability to swallow and their gag reflex ([cranial nerves IX and X](#)).
 - The thyroid is typically not visible. Assess for an enlarged thyroid gland at the suprasternal notch.

Assessing the Neck

- Check neck muscles for symmetry, masses, swelling, and range of motion.
- Palpate cervical lymph nodes for signs of swelling or tenderness; cervical lymph nodes should not be fixed (unmovable) or palpable (unless the patient is very thin). Lymph nodes should be small and freely moving.
- Assess head and neck range of motion.
- Check trapezius muscle strength. Ask the patient to shrug their shoulders against your hands as you apply resistance ([cranial nerve XI](#)).
- Check cervical muscle strength. Ask the patient to turn their chin/jaw against your hand.
- Assess trachea for deviation; it should be midline.
- Evaluate thyroid gland noting enlargement or presence of nodules and masses; it should be smooth.
- Examine the carotid arteries as part of the [cardiac assessment](#), taking care to palpate the carotid arteries one at a time, noting symmetry, strength, amplitude, and presence of an abnormal thrill. Listen for bruits using the diaphragm of your stethoscope.
- Assess for cervical point tenderness along the posterior aspect of the neck.

PEARLS

- Compare any new findings with the patient's past medical history.
- Due to sun exposure, skin cancers can develop on the scalp. The scalp location accounts for up to 49% of melanomas.
- The elements of the HEENT assessment can be interwoven with the cranial nerve assessment.
- Ptosis may be congenital or caused by a disorder affecting the muscle tendon, muscle, or nerve of the eyelid. Unilateral ptosis with impaired extraocular movement suggests a compressive third cranial nerve palsy.
- A yellowish discoloration of the sclera indicates jaundice.
- Signs of Cushing's syndrome on the face include moon facies (a rounded face), hirsutism (male pattern hair growth on the face), and acne (papular or pustular lesions).
- Pain with movement of the auricle and tragus of the ear occurs in acute otitis externa (inflammation of the ear canal), but not in otitis media (inflammation of the middle ear).
- In viral rhinitis, the nasal mucosa is often red and swollen; in allergic rhinitis, it may be pale, bluish, or red.

- Tracheal deviation could be a serious sign of tension pneumothorax, pleural effusion, tumor, or goiter.

References

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