

# What's *THAT*? 9 Curious Medical Symptoms You Shouldn't Ignore

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I'm intrigued by medical mysteries, which is why I'm a fan of Dr. Lisa Sanders, an associate professor at the Yale University School of Medicine. She writes the column, "Diagnosis," for *The New York Times Magazine*. Her articles follow patients suffering from curious medical symptoms as they search for a diagnosis. "Diagnosis" is now a documentary series on Netflix, and I spent most of a recent Sunday binge-watching it in stupefied wonder at the human condition.

My Netflix gorge led me to check the Internet for unusual medical symptoms. A Google search turned up enough info to fill a couple of web servers, so I narrowed the results down to the nine symptoms that I'm sharing below. These symptoms, which happen to real people, have been studied and written about by the scientific community.

## **Symptom 1: You think you're larger, or smaller, than you really are.**

Alice takes a trip to Wonderland, where she eats a special cake, then grows so big she hits her head on the ceiling. "Curiouser and curiouser," Alice cries. What's even more curiouser is that there is an actual medical condition called Alice in Wonderland syndrome (AIWS)<sup>1</sup> that can make a person feel as if they're bigger or smaller than they really are. It's not a

hallucination, but rather an alteration of visual perception in that way that the sizes of body parts or sizes of external objects are perceived.

Research has found a link between AIWS and migraines.

This curious medical symptom is also associated with temporal lobe epilepsy, brain tumors, psychoactive drug reactions and Epstein-Barr virus infections.<sup>2</sup>

## **Symptom 2: Your hand seems to have a mind of its own.**

A hand (or sometimes a leg) suddenly behaves as if it's controlled by someone else. Alien Hand Syndrome (AHS) describes several neurologic disorders that share the appearance of seemingly purposeful movement by one hand (or leg) but has nothing to do with conscious intent. In one case, a 77-year-old woman's hand stroked her face and hair. AHS has been associated with stroke, multiple sclerosis and epilepsy.<sup>3</sup>

## **Symptom 3: You eat things that aren't food.**

If dirt, paint chips, soap or crayons become your go-to choice for quick snacks, this can signal a compulsive eating disorder. Called Pica, the condition involves eating things that are not typically thought of as food and don't contain significant nutritional value. Pica

may be due to an iron or zinc deficiency.<sup>4</sup> According to the National Institutes of Health, this unusual eating preference is more common in kids than adults.

However, pregnant women are one of the most likely groups to suffer from the disorder.<sup>5</sup> Needless to say, Pica can cause problems with teeth and the digestive system.

**Symptom 4: Your handwriting becomes cramped or sloppy.**

Some educators blame computer use for the demise of readable handwriting.<sup>6</sup> But if there's a noticeable change in writing style—particularly if words have gotten a lot smaller—it could be a sign of Parkinson's disease. Many people with Parkinson's first notice changes in their handwriting, a symptom called micrographia. Parkinson's causes progressively slower movements and muscle stiffness, resulting in a cramped handwriting style.<sup>7</sup>

**Symptom 5: Your sense of smell is going, going, gone.**

When you're no longer able to smell things like hot apple pie baking in the oven, peanut butter on your toast, or brewing coffee, something's up.

Unfortunately, the loss of smell is an early and common sign of both Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease. Research links the loss of the sense of smell—also called olfactory dysfunction—with dementia.<sup>8</sup>

**Symptom 6: Your breath smells sweet or fruity.**

A person's breath can provide intriguing clues to overall health. A sweet or fruity odor can be a sign of ketoacidosis, an acute complication of diabetes.<sup>9</sup> When high blood sugar isn't treated, the result can be ketoacidosis, which occurs when the body doesn't have enough insulin. The fruity scent and taste come from a buildup of ketones in the bloodstream, and

because it can lead to a life-threatening diabetic coma, get to a doctor as soon as you notice it.

**Symptom 7: Your urine is cloudy, and it hurts to go.**

Like your breath, your urine says a lot about health. If it's cloudy instead of clear or light yellow, maybe you need to drink more water. But if you amp up your fluid intake and your urine is still cloudy, it could be a sign of a urinary tract infection, kidney stones, a sexually transmitted infection, or even diabetes.<sup>10</sup> If you see blood in the commode, experience pain with urination, have abdominal discomfort, chills or a fever, call your doctor right away. A urinary tract infection can get out of control quickly, especially in a child or an older adult. If it works its way to the kidneys, it could lead to sepsis.

**Symptom 8: You develop lots of bruises in unusual places.**

Everyone gets a bruise here and there and now and then, but if they are popping up easier than usual, it could point to the presence of acute myeloid leukemia. People with leukemia are more likely to bruise because their bodies don't make enough platelets to plug bleeding blood vessels. Leukemia bruises look like any other kind of bruise, but there are usually more of them than normal.<sup>11</sup> They also appear in unusual places, like on the back, the hands and legs.

**Symptom 9: Your jaw hurts but nothing is wrong with your teeth.**

While the most common heart attack sign is chest pain or discomfort, women can experience seemingly random symptoms: shortness of breath, nausea or vomiting, and back or jaw pain.<sup>12</sup> While heart attacks were once characterized as an older man's disease, they're increasing among young people, especially younger women. In a recent study of 28,000 people

hospitalized for heart attacks, 30% of those patients were 35 to 54 years old. Women involved in the study were more likely to display such atypical symptoms compared to men. That's why a heart attack in a female is more likely to be missed.<sup>13</sup>

Do any of these curious medical symptoms sound too familiar? Then the prudent action to take is to seek medical advice without delay. Even if you feel well but haven't visited your doctor yet this year, consider making an appointment. Getting an annual wellness checkup and preventive screenings like bloodwork for cholesterol, blood pressure monitoring and a finger prick for glucose, can save your life.

For more information, check out our infographic, [UNFAMILIAR BUT UNDENIABLE: Lesser-Known Medical Symptoms Affecting Real People](#). ■

<sup>1</sup>[AAN.com](#), "Clinical Characteristics of Alice in Wonderland Disorder"

<sup>2</sup>[National Institutes of Health](#), "Alice in Wonderland Syndrome"

<sup>3</sup>[Neurology MedLink](#), "Alien Hand Syndrome"

<sup>4</sup>[Nationaleatingdisorders.org](#), "Pica Evaluation and Diagnosis"

<sup>5</sup>[National Institutes of Health](#), "Eating Everything Except Food"

<sup>6</sup>[Education World](#), "Have Computers Forced Handwriting Out of the Picture?"

<sup>7</sup>[Parkinson.org](#), "Suggestions for Handwriting Changes"

<sup>8</sup>[Wiley Online Library](#), "Olfactory Dysfunction Predicts Subsequent Dementia in Older U.S. Adults"

<sup>9</sup>[American Diabetes Association](#), "DKA (Ketoacidosis) and Ketones"

<sup>10</sup>[WebMD](#), "Why is Your Urine Cloudy?"

<sup>11</sup>[Healthline](#), "Symptoms of Leukemia in Pictures: Rashes and Bruises"

<sup>12</sup>[American Heart Association](#), "Warning Signs of a Heart Attack"

<sup>13</sup>[American Heart Association](#), "Heart Attacks are Becoming More Common in Younger People, Especially Women"

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