

Being discharged without a diagnosis

You are being given this information as your team are discharging you from the emergency department without a definite diagnosis. This is a very common thing to occur, but it can sometimes leave people wondering why don't we know, should we be doing more and what might happen next and these questions can lead to a lot of anxiety. Whilst every case is different and your ED team will explain the specifics in your case, this seeks to answer some common questions.

Why don't you know what caused/is causing my symptoms

Medicine is very much not black and white: it is mostly shades of grey. Whilst we always try our hardest to come to a diagnosis during your visit to A+E, it is very common for us to not know what is causing symptoms. People can experience the same problem in countless ways, and many different problems can cause the same symptoms.

Why don't you do more tests

Tests can be incredibly helpful in the right situation, but they are not always as useful as they might first seem. We must be careful to do the right test at the right time. There are lots of downside's to testing that can mean another test is not the right thing to do

- Testing 'blindly' when we are very uncertain what we are looking for rarely gives us an answer and can often leave things even more uncertain
- Tests can have direct harms; needles, pain, radiation and more.
- Tests can also cause harm by finding things by chance we were not looking for. We then often don't know if they are important or not, causing anxiety and stress without benefit. This can also lead to more tests, which cause more harm and so on.
- Tests can be un-necessary; many conditions will get better by themselves so there is no point in us doing lots of possibly harmful tests first

Maybe doing more tests later was mentioned, why don't you do them now?

As above, tests are not always helpful. We may have mentioned more tests in the future but might not be arranging them now for several reasons

- It's not possible to arrange that test now
- More information is needed before we are certain if that test will be useful. That might be information that time will provide (see using time as a test), or it might be that a specialist's opinion, or the results from other tests are needed first.

Using time as a test

Symptoms might change, patterns might be identified, other symptoms might appear, or indeed everything might go away. All of this is important information and can be a just as if not more useful test than a blood test or scan in the right circumstances. What is important is that if your symptoms do change over time you should tell someone about this.

Why don't you give me a best guess diagnosis

Sometimes this will happen. However, your team may choose to simply say that we don't know what is wrong right now and there are good reasons for this. Giving someone a diagnosis can stop other healthcare professionals thinking about what else it could be, even if the initial diagnosis is wrong. This is called diagnostic momentum and is an incredibly common cause of medical errors when cases are reviewed. It might be that your team have a best guess diagnosis, or they may not, but if they don't give you a diagnosis this is because they believe this is the best option at this point.

How can I get better if you're not treating me

We should never underestimate the body's ability to heal itself. Many conditions will simply get better without treatment. Even if this is not the case for you, we must try our best not to cause harm by giving the wrong treatment.

What will happen next

We never know for certain, and if we are not sure what is causing your symptoms this can be an even harder question to answer. However we will try to explain as much as possible to you what we think might happen so that you know what to expect. It might be we feel this is most likely to get better by itself, or it may not, but how it changes will help us understand or know what to do (see above). You might be waiting an appointment with your own doctor or a specialist.

Could it be something dangerous

If you are being discharged this is because we don't believe that there is anything immediately dangerous causing your symptoms and we do not expect you to suddenly get worse. We can usually be quite confident of this even when we are not certain what is causing your symptoms.

What should I do if I'm getting worse

If you think you are getting worse, or that things are not going the way we were expecting, then you should see another health professional to discuss this. This might be NHS 24, your own doctor, coming to A+E again or calling an ambulance depending on how urgent you think the change is. This is the case whether you were just discharged an hour ago or days ago, if things are changing and you are worried you should tell someone.

If you have any questions about your care please discuss this with your team. We always try to ensure everyone leaves understanding what is happening and why. We will always seek to make decisions about your care jointly with you.