

AHRQ Uncertainty Grant  
SP Uncertainty Encounter Template

Case Title: Headache/Female/Primary/ED/Anxious

Standardized Patient Name: Samantha Peterson

Gender: Female

Age Range: 41 years old

Setting: Emergency Department

Primary vs. Sign-Out Patient: Primary

Emotional State: Nervous/Anxious

Initial Presenting Symptoms: Headache

Symptoms: Ongoing (report as 3 out of 10 if asked)

## SP Case Summary Guide

Summary of the Scenario:

You are a 41-year-old female patient with significant past medical history significant for hypothyroidism, who presented to the ED for evaluation of a gradual-onset headache, located in the back of your head, which started 2 days ago. The pain is constant, dull, and radiates to your forehead. You have not had any other symptoms. You have been taking Tylenol over-the-counter for your headache. Your only medication is Synthroid. You have not had any surgeries. You recall having similar, but milder, headaches in the past. You have mild sensitivity to bright lights, and you do not have any vision change.

Upon arrival to the ED a series of tests (Lab testing, urine test) were performed. You are awaiting the results.

Your symptoms have improved significantly after your treatment in the ED.

You are quite anxious, as your friend was recently diagnosed with a brain tumor. You want to know what is causing your pain. You want a diagnosis. You want peace of mind that this is not cancer. You wish that a definitive test was done of your brain to reassure you of any cancer.

### **Demeanor / Personality and emotional starting point:**

*Nervous / Anxious*

*For the SP, to better comprehend the patient's demeanor:*

<b>Feelings</b>	<p>NERVOUS/ANXIOUS, both about awaiting results and after being given no diagnosis</p> <p>The patient is nervous and anxious. The patient was scared to come to the ED for evaluation because the patient's friend recently received a brain tumor diagnosis in the ED and it took the patient a lot of courage to come in. Additionally, the patient is worried and nervous about getting results, because the patient is terrified about getting a "bad" diagnosis. The patient still does not know any results and that is making you even more nervous.</p> <p>When/if the physician indicates that no specific diagnosis has been found the patient responds in a nervous manner, "Are you sure?"</p> <p>Although the patient is nervous they are not hostile or aggressive.</p> <p>Note about emotional state—this should be considered a starting</p>
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	point for the conversation. If you start as nervous and the physician does a good job of completing the checklist and addressing your nervousness, it is okay to become progressively more reassured during the course of the interview.
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**Instructions for the SP during the conversation:**

- Greet provider upon entry to the room
- Express nervousness about getting results.
- Inquire with a nervous/anxious nature, about what the results signify when they are disclosed to you as normal.
  - “Are you sure they are normal, how can they be normal?”
- Ask what the physician sees in your evaluation that can explain your symptoms.
- When/if the physician indicates that no specific diagnosis has been found, you respond in a nervous/anxious manner.
- You can express your nervousness with the following phrases at appropriate parts of the conversation:
  - “Are you sure I’m not dying?”
  - “How do you know that I won’t develop worse symptoms?”
  - “What if this is something really bad?”
- INSTRUCTIONS FOR SPECIFIC CHECKLIST ITEMS
  - *For Item 2: Anyone to be included in conversation, if the physician asks if you want to call anyone to be included in the conversation, DECLINE to call anyone*
  - *For Item 7: Anything else expected during visit, if the physician asks if you were expecting anything else to be done during the visit, respond that you were NOT EXPECTING anything else.*

**Questions for the SP to ask the physician** (goal with these questions is to not prompt a specific checklist item but rather to provide a prompt for ongoing conversation, if needed. Avoid questions that could lead to specific prompting of checklist items.)

- “So, what is next?”
- “Should I be concerned about this?”
- “So what do I tell my family?”

**Closing Comment (if needed):\*** Thanks for trying to help me today, I’m still quite nervous, but appreciate your time and explanation.

\*Only use this closing comment if the physician is no longer making any progress through the checklist and not responding to generic prompts provided above.

Specific comments for each item on the checklist relevant to this case:

## INTRODUCTION

1. Explain to the patient that they are being discharged.  
**YES if:** *Physician makes reference to patient being discharged or going home before discussing the result.*
2. Ask if there is anyone else that the patient wishes to have included in this conversation in person and/or by phone  
**YES if:** *Physician asks if there are any other people the patient would like to be included before discussing results or next steps.*  
**SP INSTRUCTION:** *decline to call anyone*

## TEST RESULTS/ED SUMMARY

3. Clearly state that either “**life-threatening**” or “**dangerous**” conditions have not been found  
**YES if:** *Physician specifically uses EITHER the term “dangerous” or “life-threatening” and explains that these conditions have not been found*  
**Example:** *“We didn’t find any life-threatening conditions for you today.” Or “Your results did not show any dangerous conditions.”*  
**NO if:** *Physician uses other words/phrases (e.g. “emergencies”)*  
**Example:** *“Once we don’t find any serious conditions, it’s safe to go home.”*
4. Discuss diagnoses that were considered (using both medical and lay terminology).  
**YES if:** *Physician gives at least a lay terminology description of diagnoses considered.*  
**Example:** *“Today we looked for several things to explain what was causing your headache. We did a complete nerve exam to look for signs of stroke and tests to look for dehydration and pregnancy.” OR “Today we looked for several things to see why you were having a headache. We did tests to look for low blood counts, dehydration, and pregnancy.”*  
**NO if:** *Physician only uses medical terminology without validating understanding of these terms OR uses broad statement to discuss what was considered.*  
**Example:** *“We were looking for thyroid, blood and kidney problems or pregnancy” or “We were looking for any blood and electrolyte issues that may have led to your headache.”*
5. Communicate relevant results of tests to patients (normal or abnormal)  
**YES if:** *Physician puts any normal or abnormal results into clinical context for the patient.*

**Example:** “Your exam and tests were normal, so we do not see any sign of infection or stroke that would explain your headache.”

**NO if:** Physician states normal findings, but not with any context or explanation of relevance.

**Example:** “Your labs and physical examination were normal.”

6. Ask patient if there are any questions about testing and/or results

**YES if:** Physician gives at least a lay terminology description for at least one diagnosis considered.

7. Ask patient if they were expecting anything else to be done during their encounter - if yes, address reasons not done

**YES if:** Physician asks whether patient was expecting anything else to be done – this may include questioning about anticipated tests, consults, or other needs

**Examples:** “Were there any other tests you were expecting to have done today?”

“Your nerve and eye exams were normal, and you don’t have the symptoms of a brain tumor. I do not think a CT scan is needed today because in someone with a normal exam, a CT scan is almost always normal too. Also, a CT scan would expose you to radiation, and we don’t want to do that unless we believe it is absolutely necessary.”

**NO if:** Physician discusses additional testing, but the physician does not explicitly ask whether patient was expecting anything else to be done. Regardless of whether a patient has already asked about or requested additional tests (e.g., MRI), the physician **MUST EXPLICITLY** ask the patient about any other expectations.

**SP INSTRUCTION:** state that you were not expecting to have any other testing done (if asked)

## **NO/UNCERTAIN DIAGNOSIS**

8. Discuss possible alternate or working diagnoses

**YES if:** Physician mentions other possible diagnoses using a lay terminology description (can also use medical name, but needs to include a lay description).

**Examples:** “I think your headache may be related to tension or stress, or could possibly be a migraine”

9. Clearly state that there is not a confirmed explanation (diagnosis) for what the patient has been experiencing

**YES if:** Physician informs the patient that there is not currently an explanation for their symptoms. This can be done using words such “uncertain diagnosis” or “no cause found” or “we do not know what is causing your headache.” It is OK if the physician also offers some possible explanations for symptoms which are diagnoses that are not able to be confirmed in the emergency department.

**Example:** “At this time, we do not know why you have this headache. It may be because of stress that you are experiencing, or not getting enough sleep; however, with the tools we have available, we can’t tell you for sure here in the emergency department.”

**NO if:** Physician states that “there is nothing wrong with you” or some other global statement about the patient having nothing wrong (instead of a focus on cause of symptoms)

10. Validates the patient’s symptoms

**YES if:** Physician makes an empathetic statement re-assuring the patient that they understand/believe that they are still experiencing symptoms (e.g. pain)

**Example:** “I understand that you are in pain. Even though our tests have not found a cause of your pain, that doesn’t mean that you are not experiencing pain.”

11. Discuss that the ED role is to identify conditions that require immediate attention

**YES if:** Physician conveys the idea that the role of the ED is to identify and address conditions that require urgent evaluation or management

**Example:** “Our job as emergency medicine physicians is to find immediately life-threatening problems.” OR “The tests that we run in the emergency department are focused on finding problems that need immediate treatment.”

12. Normalize leaving the ED with uncertainty

**YES if:** Physician explains that not all conditions can be diagnosed, as some things just get better with symptom support.

**Example:** “For many patients, we are able to ‘rule out’ lots of dangerous things, but we can’t give them an exact name for what is happening.” OR “A lot of our patients go home without a clear explanation for their symptoms.”

## NEXT STEPS/FOLLOW UP

13. Suggest realistic expectations / trajectory for symptoms

**YES if:** Physician addresses what to expect for a timeline or course of symptoms. In some cases, this may be a clear statement of not knowing how long symptoms may continue (it is okay for there to be uncertainty).

**Examples:** “Although I cannot tell you the exact cause of your headache, in most of our patients with similar symptoms, the headache goes away within 1-2 days.” OR “At this point, I can’t tell you how long this pain may continue.”

14. Discuss next tests that are needed, if any

**YES if:** Physician discusses any potential next tests that may help further explain the cause of symptoms, or clearly states that no further testing is needed.

**Examples:** “If your headache continues past 1-2 days, or if it comes back then I would suggest you make an appointment with your primary care physician so you can follow-up on it.” OR “headache with a normal nerve exam usually gets better without treatment, and I do not think you need any other testing unless your symptoms are not better within the next week.”

15. Discuss who to see next AND in what timeframe

**YES if:** Physician discusses both who the follow-up care should be with AND when it should ideally occur, or physician explicitly states that no follow-up is needed.

**NO if:** Physician does not address BOTH who and when for the follow up.

## HOME CARE

16. Discuss a plan for managing symptoms at home

**YES if:** Physician provides at least one suggestion for how to treat/manage symptoms after leaving the emergency department. Can be medication, another therapy, or even a suggestion such as “try to get 7-8 hours of sleep each night and see if that helps.”

17. Discuss any medication changes.

**YES if:** Physician specifically discusses whether new medication has been prescribed and/or existing medication is to be stopped. Or physician states that there are no medication changes.

**NO if:** Physician does not address medications at all

18. Ask patient if there are any questions and/or anticipated problems related to next steps (self-care and future medical care) after discharge

**YES if:** Physician asks whether patient has questions about and/or anticipated problems related to managing symptoms or other tasks related to caring for oneself after discharge and/or obtaining future medical care (such as making appointments, identifying specialists, etc) after discharge.

## REASONS TO RETURN

19. Discuss what symptoms should prompt immediate return to the ED

**YES if:** Physician provides detail about specific symptoms or other events (such as lack of resolution of specific symptoms within XX timeframe or development of new symptoms) that should prompt return to the ED

**Example:** “If your pain is getting worse or if you start throwing up or get a fever, then you should return to the ER immediately”

**NO if:** Physician makes only vague statements about reasons to return, such as “return if you feel worse”

## GENERAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

20. Make eye contact

**YES if:** *repeated and/or sustained eye contact.*

21. Ask patient if there are any other questions or concerns