

Teaching the Physical Exam

MITE Monthly Tips

April 2026

Matthew Clark, DO

Introduction

There is growing skepticism about the value of physical exam (PE) skills in the era of advanced diagnostics and point-of-care technologies. Many trainees—and even practicing physicians—report low confidence in their exam skills and uncertainty about how to teach them effectively.

Evidence shows PE skills:

- Reduce diagnostic error
 - Strengthen clinician–patient connection
 - Remain highly valued by trainees and physicians
-

Key Teaching Takeaways

1. Start with Yourself

- Be intentional about refining your own PE skills
- You do not need to be an expert to teach
- Model humility and acknowledge limitations

2. Build Engagement (with Honesty)

- Assess learner confidence and perceptions around PE prior to teaching
- Don't assume learners have prior experience of skills
- Demonstrate maneuvers before expecting performance
- Balance enthusiasm with realistic limitations
- Dedicate specific time during clinical day to PE-focused bedside teaching

3. Embrace Synergy with Technology

- Physical exam skills complement POCUS and other tools
- Teach them as integrated, not competing, diagnostic interventions

4. Teach a Hypothesis-Driven Exam

- Encourage diagnostically purposeful, question-based exams (rather than repetitive comprehensive head-to-toe exams)
- Frame maneuvers as diagnostic tests/procedures

5. Use Brief Pre-Teaching

- Provide short (3–5 min) didactics before encounters
- Focus on common conditions (e.g., CHF, COPD, cirrhosis) and common findings
- Incorporate published likelihood ratios to explore yield of each maneuver
- Improves retention, confidence, engagement, and performance

6. Make Thinking Visible

- Ask learners what they hear, see, and feel
- Encourage interpretation:
 - Supports diagnosis vs. Does not support diagnosis

7. Compare & Contextualize

- Compare findings across patients with the same disease process and both similar and dissimilar disease processes
- Reinforce pattern recognition

8. Partner with Patients

- Ask patients permission for teaching and provide clear expectations

- Patients often enjoy participating
- Strengthens connection and trust

9. Use Spaced Repetition

- Revisit concepts later in the week or rotation
- Reinforces long-term retention

10. Use High-Quality Multimedia Resources

- Physical Diagnosis PDX
- Evidence-Based Physical Diagnosis (McGee)

Conclusion

Best used when:

- Teaching at the bedside
- Introducing common clinical conditions
- Reinforcing diagnostic reasoning

Best practices:

- Keep teaching brief and focused
- Integrate PE into clinical decision-making
- Combine with technology and context

Bottom Line

The physical exam is not obsolete; it is evolving.

When taught intentionally, it becomes a powerful tool for diagnosis, connection, and clinical reasoning.

References/ Further Reading

Danielson AR, Venugopal S, Mefford JM, Clarke SO. How do novices learn physical examination skills? A systematic review of the literature. *Med Educ Online*. 2019;24(1):1608142. doi:10.1080/10872981.2019.1608142

Dinh VA, Frederick J, Bartos R, et al. Effects of ultrasound implementation on physical examination learning and teaching during the first year of medical education. *J Ultrasound Med*. 2015;34(1):43–50.

Elder AT, McManus IC, Patrick A, Nair K, Vaughan L, Dacre J. The value of the physical examination in clinical practice: an international survey. *Clin Med (Lond)*. 2017;17(6):490-498. doi:10.7861/clinmedicine.17-6-490

Kossoff EH, Hubbard TW, Gowen CW Jr.. Early clinical experience enhances third-year pediatrics clerkship performance. *Acad Med*. 1999;74(11):1238–1241.

Mansoor A, Kryzhanovskaya E, Heublein M. “#13 Teaching the Physical Exam. *The Curbsiders Teach Podcast*. <http://thecurbsiders.com/teach> August 9, 2022.

Vukanovic-Criley JM, Criley S, Warde CM, et al. Competency in cardiac examination skills in medical students, trainees, physicians, and faculty: a multicenter study. *Arch Intern Med*. 2006;166(6):610-616. doi:10.1001/archinte.166.6.610

McGee, S. (2016). *Evidence-based physical diagnosis* (4th ed.). Elsevier.

Mookherjee S, Pheatt L, Ranji SR, Chou CL. Physical examination education in graduate medical education--a systematic review of the literature. *J Gen Intern Med*. 2013;28(8):1090-1099. doi:10.1007/s11606-013-2380-x

Wasson J, Sox HC Jr., Tompkins RK, et al. Teaching physical diagnosis: the effect of a structured course taught by medical students. *J Med Educ*. 1976;51(12):1014–1015.