The Acute Abdomen

This document is based on the handout from the “Surgery for Finals” course. The notes provided here summarise key aspects, focusing on areas that are popular in clinical examinations. They will complement more detailed descriptions and are not intended to be comprehensive.

Three main lists of signs
• Signs of shock
• Signs of peritonitis
• Signs of obstruction

Pale anxious shocks!
• S sinus tachycardia
• H hypotension
• O oliguria
• C cold
• K klammy
• S slow capillary refill
• Plus confusion, cyanosis, acidosis if severe

Types of shock
• Cardiogenic
• Hypovolaemic
• Anaphylactic
• Neurogenic (vasovagal)
• Septic

Trapped by Peritonitis
• T tenderness (and tachycardia)
• R reflex guarding (progresses to rigidity)
• A absent bowel sounds (or reduced)
• P pyrexia
• P percussion pain (better than “rebound”)
• E extremely unwell (with shallow resps)
• D distant-local sign (distant palpation-local tenderness eg Rovsing’s sign)
Symptoms of intestinal obstruction
• Pain
• Vomiting
• Distension
• Absolute constipation

• Commonest causes: adhesions, hernias, tumours

Dehydrated, distended and no shits
• N neoplasia (weight loss, anaemia, nodes, mass)
• O obvious peristalsis

• S scars (adhesions from previous surgery)
• H hernias
• I increased bowel sounds
• T tympanitic percussion
• S succussion splash