OSCE checklist for hand examination

An OSCE checklist for hand examination covers consent, inspecting the hands from both sides, palpating the joints, testing movement, power and sensation of the median, ulnar and radial nerves, testing function, and checking the elbow and neck before summarising.

OSCE checklist for hand examination: steps to practise

1. Clean your hands, introduce yourself, confirm the patient's name and date of birth (and wristband if an inpatient), explain the examination and gain consent.
2. Ask about pain, expose both arms to the elbows and rest the hands on a pillow.
3. Inspect the backs and the palms of the hands for swelling, deformity, nail changes, skin changes, scars and muscle wasting, including the thenar and hypothenar areas.
4. Look at the pattern of joint involvement and whether it is symmetrical, and look at the elbows for nodules or psoriasis.
5. Feel the temperature, tenderness and swelling over the joints. Gently squeeze across the knuckles while watching the face for pain.
6. Check active and passive movements of the fingers, thumb and wrist, and compare both sides.
7. Test grip and pinch grip, then test power for each nerve: thumb abduction for the median, finger spreading for the ulnar, and wrist and finger extension for the radial nerve.
8. Test sensation over the median, ulnar and radial nerve areas, comparing both hands.
9. Test for carpal tunnel signs, such as Tinel's and Phalen's tests, if the history suggests it.
10. Test function with simple tasks such as doing up a button, writing or picking up a coin.
11. Examine the elbow and say you would examine the neck, as problems there can cause hand symptoms.
12. Thank the patient, clean your hands and summarise the findings with a likely diagnosis.

What candidates commonly forget

- Not looking at both sides of the hand

- Not testing nerve function
- Not comparing both hands
- Not testing function
- Not mentioning the elbow and neck as sources

Local policy comes first

This is our own practice checklist. Your college, hospital or country may do some steps differently. Where local policy and this list disagree, follow local policy.

Practise the hands-on steps with a classmate or in a skills lab, because an AI patient cannot watch your technique. You can practise the talking part with an AI patient, and try one station free with no sign-up. Next, try Painful, stiff hands. Back to the medicine OSCE for MBBS students page: medicine OSCE for MBBS students, or see the full OSCE checklist list.

Common questions

What is the OSCE checklist for hand examination?

Introduce, consent, expose, inspect palms and backs, feel joints, test movement and power, test the median, ulnar and radial nerves, test function, check the elbow and neck and summarise.

What does a symmetrical joint pattern suggest?

It can point to an inflammatory arthritis, while an asymmetrical pattern can fit other conditions. Know the pattern your course teaches.

How do I test the median nerve?

Check sensation over the tip of the index finger and the power of thumb abduction.

Sources

- NICE CKS: carpal tunnel syndrome
- GMC: good medical practice

Checked 2026-11-13. Fees and rules change, so confirm them with the regulator before you book.