For over a century, *The Merck Manual* has been widely used by people looking for medical information about diseases. However, people who have a disease first develop symptoms, which of course are what actually brings them to see a doctor. For that reason, several years ago, we created *The Merck Manual of Patient Symptoms*, a book to help medical students and doctors diagnose the cause of many common symptoms. *The Merck Manual Go-to Home Guide for Symptoms* is a lay-friendly version of that professional reference. Of course, unlike our professional version, the *Home Guide for Symptoms* does not intend to enable readers to diagnose themselves. Making a diagnosis can be challenging even for experienced physicians who have obtained a whole battery of test results. Instead, this book provides a framework for understanding a symptom, particularly its possible causes and what doctors might do to evaluate it, including the questions they ask, the physical findings they look for during their examination, and what tests they might order.

In addition to the framework for understanding a symptom, we provide a list of warning signs, which, if present, warrant a higher degree of concern. We also provide advice on when to see the doctor and then outline what to expect when seeing the doctor.

Typically, the best way to treat a symptom is to treat its cause. However, because most symptoms have a large number of possible causes, this book cannot cover treatment of the specific diseases that may be responsible for a symptom (please see *The Merck Manual Home Health Handbook* for such information, which can be accessed online free of charge at www.merckmanuals.com). But we do discuss ways that doctors, and sometimes people at home, can relieve many symptoms.

Doctors often avoid telling people all the possible causes of their symptoms. This is not to keep people in ignorance but simply to avoid needless worry—after all, most headaches are just headaches and not meningitis or a brain tumor—and some people have trouble resisting the tendency to think the worst. However, in the internet age, where anxiety-producing information is only a few clicks away, we feel that people need truthful, complete medical facts that are presented in a way that is neither alarming nor sensationalistic and is accompanied by information on what is truly worrisome and what is not.

We hope that *The Merck Manual Go-to Home Guide for Symptoms* will serve as an aid to you, our readers, compatible with your needs and worthy of frequent use. We thank the dozens of contributors who have poured their knowledge into this volume. Suggestions for improvements will be warmly welcomed and carefully considered.

Robert S. Porter, MD
*Editor-in-Chief*

**Important:** Even a book this size cannot cover all the possible ways that diseases can affect people. Nor can we take into account each person's unique characteristics, circumstances, and medical conditions. Thus, although we are confident that our list of warning signs and recommendations on when to see the doctor cover many situations, we encourage all readers who feel that they need to see a doctor to do so. Do not let us override your judgment about the urgency of your symptoms.