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Items for developing revised classification criteria in systemic sclerosis: results of a consensus exercise with the ACR/EULAR working committee for classification criteria in systemic sclerosis

Jaap Fransen¹, Sindhu R Johnson², Frank van den Hoogen³, Murray Baron⁴, Yannick Allanore⁵, Patricia E Carreira⁶, László Czirják⁷, Christopher P Denton⁸, Oliver Distler⁹, Daniel E Furst¹⁰, Armando Gabrielli¹¹, Ariane Herrick¹², Murat Inanc¹³, Bashar Kahaleh¹⁴, Otylia Kowal-Bielecka¹⁵, Thomas A Medsger jr.¹⁶, Ulf Mueller-Ladner¹⁷, Gabriela Riemekasten¹⁸, Stanislaw Sierakowski¹⁵, Gabriele Valentini¹⁹, Doug Veale²⁰, Madelon C Vonk¹, Ulrich Walker²¹, Lorinda Chung²², Philip J. Clements¹⁰, David H Collier²³, Mary E Csuka²⁴, Sergio Jimenez²⁵, Peter A Merkel²⁶, James R Seibold²⁷, Richard Silver²⁸, Virginia Steen²⁹, Alan Tyndall²², Marco Matucci-Cerinic³⁰, Janet E Pope³¹, and Dinesh Khanna³²

¹Department of Rheumatology, Radboud University Nijmegen Medical Center, The Netherlands
²Department of Medicine, Division of Rheumatology, Toronto Western and Mount Sinai Hospitals, University of Toronto, Canada ³Department of Rheumatology, Maartenskliniek, Nijmegen, The Netherlands ⁴Department of Medicine, Division of Rheumatology, McGill University, Jewish General Hospital, Montreal, Canada ⁵Université Paris Descartes, Hôpital Cochin, Service de Rhumatologie A, APHP, Paris, France ⁶Department of Rheumatology, Hospital Universitario 12 de Octubre, Madrid, Spain ⁷Department of Rheumatology and Immunology, Medical School, University of Pécs, Pécs, Hungary ⁸Centre for Rheumatology, Royal Free Hospital, London, UK
⁹Department of Rheumatology, University Hospital Zurich, Switzerland ¹⁰Department of Medicine, David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, USA ¹¹Dipartimento di Scienze Mediche e Chirurgiche, Clinica Medica, Università Politecnica delle Marche, Ancona, Italy ¹²The University of Manchester, Manchester Academic Health Science Centre, Salford Royal NHS Foundation Trust, Salford, UK ¹³Division of Rheumatology, Department of Internal Medicine, Istanbul Faculty of Medicine, Istanbul University, Istanbul, Turkey ¹⁴Department of Medicine, Division of Rheumatology, University of Toledo, Ohio, USA ¹⁵Department of Rheumatology and Internal Medicine, Medical University in Bialystok, Poland ¹⁶Department of Medicine, Division of Rheumatology and Clinical Immunology, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, USA
¹⁷Department of Rheumatology and Clinical Immunology, Justus-Liebig University Giessen, Kerckhoff-Clinic Bad Nauheim, Germany ¹⁸Department of Medicine, Division of Rheumatology and Clinical Immunology, Charité University Hospital Berlin, Germany, and German Rheumatism Research Centre, a Leibniz Institute ¹⁹Department of Internal Medicine, Rheumatology Unit, Second University of Naples, Italy ²⁰Department of Rheumatology, St Vincent's University Hospital and The Conway Institute for Biomedical and Biomolecular Research, University College Dublin, Ireland ²¹Department of Rheumatology, University of Basel, Switzerland ²²Department of Medicine, Division of Immunology and Rheumatology, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA
²³Denver Health and Hospital Authority, University of Colorado Hospital, Denver, USA
²⁴Department of Rheumatology, Medical College Wisconsin, Milwaukee, USA ²⁵Jefferson Institute of Molecular Medicine, Connective Tissue Diseases Section, Scleroderma Center, Thomas

Jefferson University ²⁶Section of Rheumatology and the Clinical Epidemiology Unit, Boston University School of Medicine, Boston, MA, USA ²⁷Scleroderma Research Consultants, Avon, Connecticut, USA ²⁸Department of Medicine, Division of Rheumatology & Immunology, Medical University of South Carolina, USA ²⁹Department of Medicine, Division of Rheumatology, Clinical Immunology and Allergy, Georgetown University School of Medicine, USA ³⁰Department of Rheumatology AVC, Department of Biomedicine, Division of Rheumatology, AOUC, Department of Medicine, Denoche Centre, University of Florence, Italy ³¹Department of Medicine, Division of Rheumatology, University of Western Ontario, St Joseph Health Care London, University of Western Ontario, Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry, Ontario, Canada ³²University of Michigan Scleroderma Program, Ann Arbor, MI, United States of America

Abstract

Background—Classification criteria for systemic sclerosis (SSc) are being updated.

Objective—To select a set of items potentially useful for the classification of SSc using consensus procedures including the Delphi and nominal group techniques (NGT).

Methods—Items were identified through two independent consensus exercises performed by the Scleroderma Clinical Trials Consortium (SCTC) and the EULAR Scleroderma Trials and Research Group (EUSTAR). The first-round items from both exercises were collated and redundancies were removed leaving 168 items. A 3-round Delphi exercise was performed using a 1–9 scale (1=completely inappropriate and 9=completely appropriate) and a consensus meeting using NGT. During the last Delphi, the items were ranked on a 1–10 scale.

Results—Round 1: 106 experts rated the 168 items. Those with a median score <4 were removed, resulting in a list of 102 items. Round 2: The items were again rated for appropriateness and subjected to a consensus meeting using NGT by European and North American SSc experts (n=16), resulting in 23 items. Round 3: SSc experts (n=26) then individually scored each of the 23 items in a last Delphi round, using an appropriateness score (1–9) and ranking their 10 most appropriate items for classification of SSc. Presence of skin thickening, SSc-specific autoantibodies, abnormal nailfold capillary pattern and Raynaud's phenomenon ranked highest in the final list that also included items indicating internal organ involvement.

Conclusion—The Delphi exercise and NGT resulted in a set of 23 items for classification of SSc which will be assessed for their discriminative properties in a prospective study.

Keywords

Delphi technique; nominal group technique; systemic sclerosis; scleroderma; classification; classification criteria

Introduction

Systemic sclerosis (Scleroderma, SSc) is a complex multisystem autoimmune disease in which the pathogenesis is not completely understood (1). The three hallmark manifestations of the pathogenic process are vasculopathy of small vessels resulting in tissue ischemia, an immune response manifested as altered T- and B-lymphocyte function and production of autoantibodies, and fibroblast dysfunction leading to increased deposition of extracellular matrix (2).

The current classification criteria for SSc were developed in 1980 by a subcommittee of the American Rheumatism Association (ARA) (3). The ARA criteria were not intended for diagnostic purposes but for inclusion of patients in clinical studies (Table 1). ARA criteria

were developed using patients with long standing diffuse cutaneous SSc (dcSSc). As a consequence, patients with early SSc and a significant proportion of patients with limited cutaneous SSc (lcSSc) do not meet the current criteria(4–6)

Since the development of the 1980 criteria (3), knowledge regarding the association of SSc-specific autoantibodies with different SSc-phenotypes has improved (4,5). In addition, characteristic nailfold capillary changes have been found to be associated with the development of SSc (6,7) and nailfold capillaroscopy is widely accepted as a diagnostic tool (7–9). In 2001, LeRoy and Medsger proposed to revise the classification criteria to include ‘early’ cases of SSc (10). They suggested that patients may be classified as limited SSc (or ‘pre-SSc’ or ‘unclassifiable SSc’) when having Raynaud’s phenomenon (RP), a SSc-specific nail fold capillary pattern and/or SSc-specific autoantibodies (10). The validity of the proposed criteria was supported in 2008 by a large cohort of patients with RP (7). The presence of SSc-specific autoantibodies and microvascular damage (as assessed by nailfold capillaroscopy) was predictive for the development of SSc: 80% of patients with RP who had both SSc-specific autoantibodies and capillary abnormalities developed SSc (study-specific definition) at 15 years (7). Also, there is now a greater understanding of the natural history of SSc (including internal organ involvement) and availability of better diagnostic tools (11–13)

Based on new knowledge about the pathogenesis of SSc and better diagnostic modalities to classify patients with early SSc, the American College of Rheumatology (ACR) and the European League against Rheumatism (EULAR) appointed a joint committee to revise the classification criteria for SSc. The main objective of the classification criteria is to distinguish patients with SSc from those without the disease. The committee agreed that revised SSc classification criteria should meet additional requirements, they: 1) should include the complete spectrum of SSc, and should apply to patients early as well as late in the disease process; 2) should include vascular, immunologic and fibrotic manifestations; and 3) should be feasible in daily clinical practice and clinical studies, and be as close as possible to items used for diagnosis in clinical practice.

Currently, there is uncertainty about which items to include in classification criteria for SSc. To reduce the number of potential items to a set including the most promising items, we conducted consensus procedures using the Delphi technique and the nominal group technique (NGT) (14) to select a set of items as potentially useful for the classification of SSc.

Methods

Design

This study had two phases: item generation and subsequent item reduction. An internet-based Delphi approach was used for item generation, while internet-based Delphi rounds and a face-to-face meeting using the NGT were used for item reduction. These methodologies have recently been reviewed in detail(14).

Committee and expert panel

The ACR/EULAR steering committee for the classification of SSc consisted of four members from North America and four members from Europe. The committee established a panel of expert diagnosticians in SSc to advice in the revision of SSc classification criteria. The expert panel consisted of members from both Europe (n=14) and North America (n=14).

Item generation process

Delphi exercise# 1—Potential items for classification criteria were identified through two internet based consensus exercises, performed separately and independently by the Scleroderma Clinical Trials Consortium (SCTC) and the EULAR Scleroderma Trials and Research (EUSTAR) group (4). For the SCTC exercise, 96 randomly chosen SCTC members were invited to participate. During the first round of the 3-round SCTC Delphi exercise, participants were asked to nominate items that they incorporate in their daily practice to diagnose SSc (14). The aim of the EUSTAR exercise was slightly different and aimed to identify items suitable for diagnosis of early SSc (4). For the EUSTAR Delphi exercise, 121 items that were provided by 85 participants were subjected to a 3-round Delphi exercise. The first-round item lists of the two separate Delphi exercises were collated with removal of redundancies through consensus by four of the committee members, leading to a list of 168 items.

Item reduction process

For item reduction, the list of 168 items was subjected to three rounds of a new internet-based Delphi exercise using standard methodology and a face-to-face consensus meeting with members of the expert panel using the NGT.

Delphi exercise# 2—Clinicians with expertise in scleroderma from the EUSTAR and SCTC were asked to participate by e-mail. One hundred six experts rated the appropriateness of the 168 items for classification of SSc on a 1–9 scale (1= completely inappropriate and 9= completely appropriate). The appropriateness score of an item was calculated as the median of the ratings (1–9). Items with a median appropriateness score less than 4 in this round were removed, resulting in a list of 102 items.

NGT—The 102 items were grouped into organ system domains and autoantibodies. Members of the expert panel met for a 1-day face-to-face NGT meeting in 2009. The day before the meeting, the available panelists (n=16) again individually rated each of the 102 items for appropriateness. Median appropriateness scores were calculated for all items. To evaluate the level of (dis)agreement regarding appropriateness of an item, the percentage of appropriateness scores falling in the lowest tertile (1–3) and the highest tertile (7–9) were calculated. All items with their scores were discussed in detail during the NGT meeting. In the NGT consensus meeting, the 16 experts were presented the item list and encouraged to discuss each item and their opinions were recorded. This process ensured all participants had an opportunity to contribute. The expert panel suggested by consensus that certain items be combined and others discarded, resulting in a list of 23 items.

Delphi exercise# 3—Members of the expert panel (n=26 of 28) individually scored each of the 23 items in this next internet-based Delphi round, using the appropriateness score (1–9), and the median appropriateness score was calculated. In addition, the experts also chose 10 items they felt were most appropriate and important to include from the list of 23 and ranked those 10 items from most appropriate (rank 1) to least most appropriate (rank 10), to be able to discriminate between items with equal median appropriateness scores. The 23 items were ranked 1) in order of the median appropriateness score (1–9) and 2) in order of the average expert ranking (0%–100%). The average expert ranking was calculated by giving scores to the ranks: the most favorite item scored 10 points and the least most favorite scored 1 point. For each item the rank scores were summed and divided by the theoretical maximum score (26 raters*10 points=260); they were then expressed as a percentage (100% maximum). For example, if 10 raters ranked a sign or symptom as #1 (10 points each), 10 rated it as #2 (9 points each), and 6 rated it as #3 (8 points each), the total score attributed to this sign or symptom is (10*10+10*9+6*8=238). The percentage attributed to this sign or

symptom is 238/260=92% and this percentage was used to determine the ranking of the particular sign or symptom.

Results

The Delphi exercise and NGT meeting resulted in 23 items (Table 2). The items from the 1980 SSc classification criteria (Table 1) are also included in this list but are not identical (Table 2). The 23 items include skin thickening, autoantibodies, nailfold capillary abnormalities, Raynaud's phenomenon (RP), and organ system involvement deemed feasible and appropriate to be included. The presence of scleroderma (skin thickening) had the highest average ranking and a median appropriateness score of 9. The other highly ranked items included autoantibodies (positivity for anti-topoisomerase I antibodies, anti-centromere antibodies, and anti-RNA polymerase III antibodies), abnormal nailfold capillary pattern, finger tip ulcers, presence of RP, presence of interstitial lung disease, presence of renal crisis, and presence of palpable tendon or bursal friction rubs (see Table 3 for definitions).

Four items had a median score of 9 (most appropriate; Table 2). Loss of fingertip pulp or acroosteolysis, esophageal dilatation (by imaging) and calcinosis fell below the highest 10 items but all had a median appropriateness score of 7. The other 10 items had median appropriateness scores between 4 and 6.

The median rating generally corresponded with average rank. No items with a median appropriateness score of 4–6 had a 'top 10' favorite score above 20%. There was minimal disagreement for the other items, except for gastroesophageal reflux disease for which over 30% of appropriateness scores fell in the lowest tertile (1–3). There were no items with a median score below 4.

Discussion

Classification criteria for systemic sclerosis (SSc) are being updated as the existing ACR classification criteria for SSc may not be sensitive for early SSc and a significant proportion of patients with lcSSc may not be classified as SSc with the previous criteria (2;5;6;10;15;16). The results of these consensus procedures are a first step in the process. Using the Delphi and NGT, we have reduced the number of items to be considered in developing revised classification criteria for SSc in a prospective cohort study. The 23 items chosen during the NGT meeting include skin thickening, autoantibodies, nailfold capillary abnormalities, RP, and internal organ system involvement.

The 4 items in the existing ACR classification criteria for SSc (Table 1): proximal scleroderma (proximal to the MCPs), sclerodactyly, digital pitting scars or pulp loss, and bilateral basilar pulmonary fibrosis, are also included in the list of 23 items and received relative high ranking. Based on better understanding of the role of SSc-specific autoantibodies and presence of nailfold abnormalities as potential diagnostic criteria for SSc and considering of the natural history of SSc, panelists also rated auto-antibodies (antinuclear antibodies, anti-centromere, anti-topoisomerase I, anti-RNA polymerase III, and anti-PM-Scl antibodies) high for appropriateness, after the presence of skin sclerosis. Other items not in the 1980 criteria that will be tested in the ongoing ACR-EULAR SSc criteria project include: early vascular manifestations (Raynaud's phenomenon, nailfold capillary pattern), skin and subcutaneous tissue manifestations (puffy fingers, calcinosis, telangiectasia), musculoskeletal manifestations (flexion contractures of the fingers, tendon or bursal friction rubs), and internal organ involvement (renal crisis, pulmonary arterial

hypertension, interstitial lung disease (reduced FVC and reduced DLCO), esophageal dilatation, gastroesophageal reflux disease, dysphagia).

Nearly all proposed items in the list of 23 can be considered to be frequently used to diagnose and assess patients with SSc in clinical practice (12;17–19). For example, the presence of skin thickening is a hallmark of clinical presentation of SSc and present in 95% of patients (12). Other items such as the presence of RP and SSc-specific autoantibodies are characteristic of SSc (20). The absence of sclerodactyly, absence of RP, and/or absence of anti-nuclear antibodies and SSc-specific autoantibodies are used in clinical practice to differentiate SSc from scleroderma-like disorders such as eosinophilic fasciitis and scleromyxedema (20). Occurring in more than 90% of patients, RP often precedes skin and visceral fibrosis by years or decades, particularly in lcSSc patients (7;8;21). Nailfold capillary microscopy (NCM) is a useful noninvasive method of visualizing vascular abnormalities in SSc. It can be performed easily in the clinic without highly specialized equipment (22). The presence of dilated capillaries and peri-capillary hemorrhage are very common in SSc and the presence of these findings in patients with isolated RP predicts future evolution to SSc (7;23). However, it is important to note that nailbed vascular changes are not unique to SSc, as they can occur in other CTD, especially dermatomyositis in which Raynaud's phenomenon is less frequent and the autoantibody profile is different. In late SSc, there may be much drop out of capillaries to the extent that no dilated capillaries can be seen by usual magnification. SSc is also characterized by specific serum autoantibodies, that include anti-topoisomerase I, anti-centromere, anti-Th/To, anti-U3 RNP, anti-RNA polymerase I/III and others (7;24). These autoantibodies are known predictors of progression from isolated RP to SSc, internal organ involvement, and survival in SSc. Antibodies such as anti-Th/To and anti-U3 RNP; and in some cases RNA polymerase I/III may have high specificity for SSc, but are not yet commercially available.

While all 23 signs and symptoms are associated with SSc, the final result of this project is to find combination of these items that are able to discriminate the presence of SSc from similar diseases. Some items that generally occur in patients with SSc, such as Raynaud's phenomenon or positive antinuclear antibodies, may not discriminate well if they also frequently occur in other systemic connective tissue diseases. That means that their presence may be useful in prompting the physician to apply a diagnostic work-up, in which SSc is just one of the diagnoses to be considered. Other items are quite specific for SSc, such as renal crisis or digital pulp loss, but their occurrence may be too low to be very useful in discriminating SSc from other diseases. Then it may be useful to combine certain items, for example: 'having pulmonary arterial hypertension, interstitial lung disease, or renal crisis' or 'positive for SSc specific auto-antibodies'. Moreover, classification criteria also should apply to patients with established disease and ideally also early in the disease process.

The items were tested in existing databases of SSc patients and patients with similar 'SSc mimicking' disorders, such as SLE, myositis, or primary Raynaud's phenomenon(25). Not all items were tested in all databases, and not all 'SSc mimicking' disorders were represented, but the prevalence in SSc and mimickers was compared and discriminant validity of many items was very high.

The starting point of the Delphi had been an extensive list of items, derived from the first rounds of two independent Delphi exercises by the EUSTAR and by the SCTC. The EUSTAR Delphi exercise resulted in the identification of three main domains for SSc diagnosis: skin, vascular and laboratory, while Raynaud's phenomenon, puffy fingers and antinuclear antibodies were considered as 'indicators' for referral to a specialist for potential SSc diagnosis(4) The SCTC Delphi exercise has been presented as an abstract(26)

We were able to conduct a Delphi exercise using experts from member institutions of the SCTC and EUSTAR who have expertise in management of SSc with a good response rate. Eighty percent of SCTC members answered the first round and the response to the EULAR Delphi was 70%. Consensus methods such as Delphi and NGT are useful to apply if choices are to be made in presence of considerable uncertainty. The proposed 23 items need further testing using data-driven methods and item reduction. Most importantly, the discriminatory capacity of the items should be tested prospectively in patients with SSc and in patients with diseases that mimic SSc such as eosinophilic fasciitis, scleromyxedema, systemic lupus erythematosus, dermatomyositis/polymyositis, primary Raynaud's, generalized morphea, and nephrogenic systemic fibrosis. However, some of these disorders may be even rarer than SSc. Once the univariate discriminatory ability of the items is known, further item reduction and weighting of items for a final criteria set may be required. Lastly, testing in an independent data set is needed.

In conclusion, many potential items for revised SSc criteria have been reduced to 23 items that include clinical, radiographic, and serological features of SSc, which capture the breadth and depth of the disease. These items are currently being validated in an international observational study for their inclusion in revised classification criteria for SSc.

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Table 1

American College of Rheumatology preliminary classification criteria for SSc [3].

1980 preliminary criteria for the classification of SSc

Major criterion

- Proximal scleroderma: bilateral and symmetrical sclerodermatous changes in any area proximal to the metacarpophalangeal (MCPs) or metatarsophalangeal (MTPs) joints.

Minor criteria

- Sclerodactyly: sclerodermatous changes at finger or toes only.
- Digital pitting scars at finger tips or loss of distal finger pad substance (pulp loss)
- Bilateral basilar pulmonary fibrosis on chest X-ray

To be classified as SSc, a patient has to fulfill the major criterion OR at least 2 of the 3 minor criteria.

Table 2

Results of Round 3 Delphi exercise (N=26) in order of ranking for appropriateness

	Item	Median Appropriateness Score (1-9)	Percentage of appropriateness scores between 1-3	Average sum rank
1*	Presence of scleroderma (skin thickening)	9	0%	67%
2	Positive anti-topoisomerase I antibody	9	0%	57%
3	Positive anti-centromere antibody	9	0%	50%
4	Positive anti-RNA polymerase III antibody	9	0%	34%
5	Abnormal nailfold capillary pattern	8	0%	50%
6*	Finger tip ulcers/pitting scars	8	0%	33%
7	Renal crisis	8	0%	28%
8	Raynaud's phenomenon	7	4%	27%
9*	Interstitial lung disease/pulmonary fibrosis	7	0%	25%
10	Tendon or bursal friction rubs	7	4%	22%
11*	Fingertip pulp loss or acroosteolysis	7	4%	7%
12	Esophageal dilatation on X ray or CT	7	16%	9%
13	Calcinosis, dermal, subcutaneous or intramuscular	7	8%	4%
14	Telangiectasia consistent with SSc	6	4%	11%
15	Puffy fingers	6	8%	10%
16	Pulmonary arterial hypertension	6	13%	8%
17	Positive antinuclear antibody	5	12%	9%
18	Flexion contractures of the fingers	5	16%	2%
19	Positive anti-PM-Scl antibodies	5	28%	0%
20	Reduced FVC% predicted	5	20%	0%
21	Reduced DLCO% predicted	4	24%	7%
22	Recurrent or persistent gastroesophageal reflux disease	4	44%	5%
23	Dysphagia for solid foods	4	24%	2%

The 23 items were rated according to their appropriateness (1=most inappropriate and 9=most appropriate) and raters indicated their 10 most favorite items from 10 (most favorite) to 1 (least most favorite). Items were ranked in order of 1) the median appropriateness rating and 2) the top-10 favorites ranking. Median appropriateness score (1-9) was calculated from the scores of the raters. Ratings between 1-3 indicate the percentage of raters that rated the item as inappropriate. Top 10 favorites ranking indicates the average ranking of an item in the top 10, with higher percentages indicating a higher average rank (100% as maximum).

Table 3

Proposed item definitions

Item	Definition
Abnormal nailfold capillary pattern consistent with SSc	Enlarged capillaries and/or capillary loss with or without peri-capillary hemorrhages.
Anti-centromere antibody or centromere pattern on antinuclear antibody test	Positive according to local laboratory standards
Anti-topoisomerase I antibody	Positive according to local laboratory standards
Antinuclear antibody	Positive according to local laboratory standards
Anti-PM-Scl antibody	Positive according to local laboratory standards
Anti-RNA polymerase III antibody	Positive according to local laboratory standards. May not be available in all labs as part of extractable nuclear antigen (ENA)
Calcinosis	Detected either clinically or by radiographically. Calcinosis is defined as palpable, dermal and/or subcutaneous or intramuscular deposits. It is usually located in digits or over large proximal joints or extensor surfaces of distal extremities.
Reduced carbon monoxide diffusion capacity (DLCO) percent predicted	According to local laboratory standards, <80% of predicted or lower cut point.
Digital pulp loss or acro-osteolysis	Loss of substance from the fingertip pad, as a result of ischemia rather than trauma or exogenous cause (27). Acroosteolysis – osteolysis of the distal phalanx/phalanges (28)
Dysphagia for solid foods	By history, as substernal discomfort on swallowing or sensation of food being held up or “stuck” in a retrosternal location.
Esophageal dilatation	Esophagus dilated by imaging (barium swallow, chest radiograph, or high resolution computed tomography [HRCT] of the chest).
Finger flexion contractures	Inability to extend fingers to neutral position due to skin or tendon tightening, not due to arthritis deformities, Dupuytren’s or other conditions.
Finger tip ulcers or pitting scars	Ulcers or scars not thought to be due to trauma. Digital pitting scars are depressed areas at the tips as a result of ischemia, rather than trauma or exogenous causes.
Reduced forced vital capacity (FVC) percent predicted	According to local laboratory standards, <80% of predicted or lower cut point.
Interstitial lung disease or pulmonary fibrosis	Pulmonary fibrosis on HRCT or chest radiograph, most pronounced in the basilar portions of the lungs, or presence of ‘Velcro’ crackles on auscultation.
Persistent or recurrent gastro-esophageal reflux disease	By history, endoscopy or imaging.
Puffy fingers	Swollen digits - a diffuse, usually nonpitting increase in soft tissue mass of the digits extending beyond the normal confines of the joint capsule. Normal digits are tapered distally with the tissues following the contours of the digital bone and joint structures. Swelling of the digits obliterates these contours.
Pulmonary arterial hypertension	Pulmonary arterial hypertension diagnosed by right heart catheterization.
Raynaud’s phenomenon	Self report or reported by a physician with at least a two-phase color change in finger(s) and often toe(s) consisting of pallor, cyanosis and/or reactive hyperemia in response to cold exposure or emotion; usually one phase is pallor.
Renal crisis	New onset of a systolic blood pressure (SBP) \geq 140 mmHg and diastolic blood pressure (DBP) \geq 90 mmHg; OR a rise in SBP \geq 30 mmHg compared to usual and rise in DBP \geq 20 mmHg compared to usual, AND at least 1 of these features: 1. Serum creatinine: increase of \geq 50% above usual level; 2. Proteinuria: \geq 2+ by dipstick confirmed by protein: creatinine ratio $>$ ULN; 3. Hematuria: \geq 2+ by dipstick or $>$ 10 RBCs/HPF (without menstruation); 4. Thrombocytopenia: $<$ 100,000/mm ³ ; 5. Hemolysis (fragmented RBC: by blood smear or increased reticulocyte count.
Scleroderma (skin thickening)	Skin thickening or hardening anywhere but not due to scarring after injury, trauma, etc.
Telangiectasias	Telangiectasias in a scleroderma like pattern are round and well demarcated and found on hands, lips, inside of the mouth, and/or large matt-like telangiectasias. Telangiectasias are visible macular dilated superficial blood vessels which collapse upon pressure and fill slowly when

Item	Definition
Tendon or bursal friction rubs	pressure is released; distinguishable from rapidly filling spider angiomas with central arteriole and from dilated superficial vessels. One or more friction rubs detectable at places such as shoulders, olecranon bursae, wrists (flexor or extensors), fingers (flexor or extensor), knees, ankles (Achilles, peroneal, posterior tibial, or anterior tibial tendons).