

Medspeak In Plain Language

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Many Americans have questions about their health. You may be one of them! You may read newspapers or magazines. You may listen to radio or watch TV. You may even search the Internet. Often, you find special words that doctors and nurses use. These are hard to understand so we call them “medspeak.”

The Medical Library Association wants to help you figure out “medspeak” terms. We wrote this to make it easier to understand what a doctor or nurse tells you. Inside you’ll find tips on how to understand many health words. You will also learn how to find good health sites on the Web.

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Prepared in cooperation with the
Massachusetts Health Sciences Library Network (MAHSLIN)
Working Group for Health Literacy

Deciphering Medspeak

A ACE INHIBITORS - This means angiotension-converting enzyme inhibitors. Drugs often used to treat heart problems or high blood pressure. They help keep blood vessels open so the blood can flow more easily. Then the heart doesn't have to work so hard.

ACUTE - a serious illness or injury. A doctor or nurse should take care of it right away.

ADJUNCT - a drug or treatment that is used in combination with another drug or treatment. This helps it work better.

AIDS - This means Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. It is a disease in which people have trouble fighting off infections. People with AIDS get sick very easily.

ALGIA - This is part of a word. It means pain or ache. For example, myalgia means muscle pain.

ALLERGY - when the body overreacts to something that is usually harmless. Things like dust, animal hairs, food or plants may do this. If you are allergic to something, you may have runny eyes, coughing or itching.

B BACTERIA - tiny organisms found in dirt, water and air. Some of them are helpful, but others may make you sick. Germs are bacteria.

BASAL METABOLIC RATE - a test done when you are resting quietly. It measures how much air you breathe and how much energy you spend.

BENIGN - "Not" cancer.

BETA BLOCKERS - drugs often used to treat high blood pressure. They help the heart beat more slowly and gently.

BLOOD CLOT - a clump of blood that sticks together in the blood vessels (tubes that carry blood). A blood clot can stop the blood from flowing.

BRACHI, BRACHIO - This is part of a word. It means something to do with the arm. For example, a brachial vein is a vein in your arm.

BRADY - This is part of a word. It means slow. For example, bradycardia means slow heart beat.

BRONCHI, BRONCHO - These are parts of a word. They mean some of the tubes in your throat and chest. You breathe through them. The tubes go into your lungs. BRONCHI is in the word bronchitis. Bronchitis means these tubes are swollen inside.

C CARCIN - This is part of a word. It means cancer. CARCIN is in the word carcinogen. It means "things that cause cancer."

CARDIO - This is part of a word. It means heart. CARDIO is in cardiovascular system. It means all the body parts that help blood move around.

CENTESIS - when a needle is put into the body to take out some fluid

CHD - This means Coronary Heart Disease. This is a clog in the “pipes” where blood comes out of the heart. The “pipes” are called the coronary arteries.

CHROMOSOME - a part of your genes. They look like tiny threads inside each cell. They are in all the cells of your body. Genes make you who you are. You get them from your birth parents.

CHRONIC - when a sickness has no cure. It lasts a long time. You might be able to keep it from getting worse. Your doctor can help you work on this. People who have asthma or diabetes have chronic disease.

CYST - a sac or pouch that forms inside your body. The pouch fills up with fluid. The fluid gets stuck inside the pouch.

D **DECRUDESCENCE** - when you start to feel a little better. You have fewer symptoms.

DEGENERATIVE DISORDER - a sickness in a part or parts of your body. This sickness gets worse as time goes on. Arthritis is one of these kinds of problems.

DERM, DERMA - This is part of a word. It means skin. A dermatologist is a skin doctor.

DIAGNOSIS - when a doctor decides what’s making you sick. A doctor looks at tests, symptoms and your medical history. The doctor then makes a diagnosis.

DIFFERENTIAL DIAGNOSIS - a list of diseases with symptoms that are alike. A fever and a runny nose are symptoms. The flu or the common cold are possible causes.

DIS - This is part of a word. It means removal or reversal. A dislocated bone is not in the right place.

DYS - This is part of a word. It means difficulty. A dyslexic has problems reading.

E **ECTO** - This is part of a word. It means outside. Ectoderm is a layer of skin.

-ECTOMY - This is the end of a word. It means removal by surgery. An appendectomy is surgery to remove your appendix.

EDEMA - swelling caused by fluid build-up. This can be caused by allergy, disease or injury. Most often occurs in feet, ankles and legs.

EEG - means electroencephalogram. This is a test. It measures the electrical activity of your brain. This test does not hurt.

EKG or ECG - means electrocardiogram. This test measures the electrical activity in your heart. This test does not hurt.

ELECTRO - This is part of a word. It means electricity.

ELECTROLYTES - important chemicals in the body that you need to stay healthy

EMBOLISM - something that blocks a blood vessel such as a blood clot, a clump of cells, an air bubble or a foreign object

ENDO - This is part of a word. It means inner or inside. For example, endocarditis means a swelling inside the heart.

ENDOCRINE GLANDS - a group of cells that make chemicals inside the body that tell your body how to work and grow

EP, EPI - This is part of a word. It means over or above. See “epidermis”

EPIDERMIS - means the top layer of skin

EXOCRINE GLANDS - a group of cells that give off fluids such as sweat, tears and saliva

F **FASCIA** - a layer of tissue below the skin that covers muscles, soft organs, and other tissues

FAT METABOLISM - the way the body changes fatty foods into energy

FIBROADENOMA - a growth in the breast that is firm and moveable but is not cancer

FONTANEL - the two “soft spots” found on the top of a baby’s head. Fontanel usually disappear by the time the baby is 18-24 months old.

G **GASTRI, GASTRO** - This is part of a word. It means stomach. Gastritis means the stomach is red and irritated inside.

GENE - decides characteristics such as eye color, body size

-GENESIS - This is part of a word. When used at the end of a word, it means producing. For example, pathogenesis means disease producing.

GI SERIES - a group of X-rays of the gut or digestive system

GLAND - a group of cells in the body that makes and gives off substances that the body needs such as tears, sweat and hormones

H **HEM, HEMA, HEMO** - This is part of a word. It means blood. For example, hematoma means a swelling with blood inside.

HYPER - This is part of a word. It means more. For example, a hyperactive thyroid does more than it should be doing.

HYP0 - This is part of a word. It means less. For example, a hypoactive thyroid does less than it should be doing.

I **IMMUNE RESPONSE** - The body fights against things that do not belong in it by trying to destroy them. This can happen even with harmless things. See “allergy”

INDOLENT - slow growing with little pain

INTRA - This is part of a word. When used at the beginning of a word, it means inside. For example, intracranial means inside the head or skull.

IN VITRO - This means outside a living body. For example, in a test tube.

IN VIVO - takes place in a living body

ISCHEMIA - damage to body parts caused by lack of blood and oxygen

-ITIS - This is part of a word. It means swelling. It is caused by an injury or infection in your body. Signs of inflammation are redness, pain or heat. Tonsillitis means swelling of the tonsils.

J **JUXTA** - This is part of a word. It means near. Juxtaspinal means near the spine.

K **KELOID** - a scar that is hard and raised. It can keep growing after a wound has healed.

KETONE BODIES - Substances made as fats break down in the body. High levels of ketone bodies in blood or urine can be a sign of diabetes.

L **LACTASE** - a substance in the intestine that breaks down milk sugars (lactose). People with lactose intolerance cannot digest milk products.

LALTO, LALO - This is part of a word. It means speech. The word lalopathy means speech defect.

LIGAMENT - a band of tissue that joins bones to other bones to make joints

LIPO - This is part of a word. It means body fat. Liposuction surgery removes body fat.

LYMPH - a fluid created in the lymph glands that contain white blood cells

M **MALIGNANT** - a harmful condition. A malignant tumor is one that continues to grow.

MEMBRANE - This means a kind of thin skin. It covers some body parts. Your nasal membrane covers the inside of your nose.

METASTASIS - when cancer cells spread

MI - This means Myocardial Infarction. An MI is a heart attack. Blood can't get to the heart. The heart stops beating.

MINOR SURGERY - This is when a small operation is done. The person is not always put to sleep. Sometimes a body part is given drugs to numb it. Only a short time is spent in the hospital. It also can be done in a doctor's office.

MONO - This is part of a word. It means one or single. MONO is used in many medical words. Mononucleosis is a sickness of one part of the blood. Only the white blood cells have it. Monochromatic means having one color.

MY, MYO - These are parts of a word. They mean muscle. Myalgia means muscle pain.

MYELIN - This is a cover around each nerve. It protects them.

MYOPIA - This is an eye problem. Things far off seem blurry. This is also called near-sightedness.

n **NASO** - This is part of a word. It means nose. NASO is in the words nasogastric tube. It means a tube that goes down your nose. The tube goes into your stomach.

NEONATE - This word means a baby less than one month old.

NEPHR, NEPHRO - This is part of a word. It means kidney. NEPHRO is in the word nephrectomy. It means having a kidney taken out.

NEURO - This is part of a word. It means nerve. This includes the brain. Nerves send messages about pain, hot, cold and other feelings.

NOSO - This is part of a word. It means being sick. Nosocomial means getting sick in a hospital.

o **ONCO** - This is part of a word. It means cancer. ONCO is in oncologist. That is a doctor who takes care of cancer.

-OMA - This is part of a word. It means a large clump of cells. It is in lymphoma. This is a clump of cells of a special kind.

-OSIS - This is part of a word. It comes at the end of a word. It means that something is not normal. Trichinosis means having a worm in your stomach, gut or muscles.

OSTEO - This is part of a word. It means bone. OSTEO is in osteoporosis. That means bones that are weak.

OTITIS - This means the ear is swollen because of germs. Otitis media is a problem in the middle of the ear.

P **PALPATION** - This is when a doctor uses his hands to feel where body parts are and what they feel like.

PALPITATION - This is when your heart beats really fast.

PARENTERAL - This is when sugar water or drugs are given with a needle. The needle goes into a vein. This is done for people who can't eat or swallow pills.

PERI - This is part of a word that means around, about or near. PERI is in the words pericardial sac. It is a sack around the heart.

PERTUSSIS - This is lung sickness that happens mostly in children. It is caused by a germ.

PHLEBO - This is part of a word. It means vein. A phlebotomist is a person who takes blood from veins. The blood is used for tests.

PLEGIA - This is part of a word. It is when some muscles can't move. PLEGIA is in the word paraplegic. It means a person who can't move parts of his or her body.

POST - This means after. The words post-surgical mean after surgery.

PRURITUS - This means an itch, or a feeling that makes you want to scratch.

Q **QUARANTINE** - This is when a person with germs is kept away from others. The germs can make other people sick. Quarantine keeps other people safe.

R **RACHI, RACHIO** - This is part of a word. It means spine.

REFLEX - This is when your body does things on its own. You don't think about doing them. Your doctor sometimes hits your knee with a rubber hammer. Your knee jumps on its own. Your doctor is testing your reflexes.

RENAL FAILURE - This is when a person's kidneys stop working. Kidneys get rid of body waste. The waste stays in a person's blood. It makes them sick.

RSV - This means Respiratory Syncytial Virus. These viruses cause breathing problems in children or adults. RSV can be spread by coughing or sneezing.

RETICULUM - a system of connected parts, a network

RHINITIS - This is swelling and redness inside the head and nose. It is usually caused by allergies or a cold.

S **SANGUI, SANGUIO** - This is part of a word. It means blood. For example, exsanguinate means to bleed a lot.

SARCO - This is part of a word. It means flesh or soft tissue. For example, sarcoma means cancer of the soft tissue.

SCHIZO - This is part of a word. It means divide or split. For example, a schizoid is split off from other people.

SCLER, SCLERO - This is part of a word. It means hard. For example, arteriosclerosis means hardening of the arteries. Arteries are blood vessels. They move blood away from the heart.

SEPSIS - This is an infection. It can make you sick. It is sometimes called blood poisoning.

SOFT TISSUE - These are soft parts inside the body. Examples of soft tissues are muscle, fat or nerves.

STATIC - does not change; stays the same

SUB - This is part of a word. It means under. For example, sublingual means under the tongue.

T **TACHY** - This is part of a word. It means fast. Tachycardia means fast heartbeat.

THERMO - This is part of a word. It means heat. For example, a thermostable means stable when heated.

THROMBO - This is part of a word. It means blood clot. For example, a thrombosis means a blood clot in an artery.

TISSUE - cells that look alike and work together for a common task

TOPICAL - to be on the surface. For example, a topical cream can be placed or rubbed on the skin.

TRANS - This is a part of a word. It means across, through or over. For example, transorbital means through the eye socket.

TRICHI, TRICHO, TRICHIA, TRICHOSIS - This is part of a word. It means hair. For example, trichobezoar means hair ball.

U **ULCER** - a sore on the skin or organ membrane. An ulcer can be caused by an infection or disease. A membrane is a tissue that covers an organ.

URO, URONO - This is part of a word. It means urine. It also can mean urinary tract. For example, uroscopy means an exam of urine.

UTER, UTERO - This is part of a word. It means uterus, also known as womb. For example, uterotonic means the tone of the uterus muscles.

V **VACCINE** - drugs that are given to protect from disease. They can be given by mouth or in a shot. For example, the flu shot is a vaccine.

VALVE - a tissue that allows fluid to flow in only one way. There are valves in the heart, veins and other places.

VIRUS - a germ that causes diseases that cannot be cured by antibiotics. Measles and chicken pox are caused by viruses.

W **WHEEZE** - a whistling sound made when you breathe, as in asthma or other lung disease. Wheezing can also be caused by an object stuck in your airway.

WITHDRAWAL SYMPTOMS - body changes such as shaking or sweating that you feel when drugs or alcohol are suddenly stopped

X **X CHROMOSOME** - the part of a gene that make a baby a girl. Girls have two X chromosomes and boys have one X and one Y chromosome.

XENO - This is part of a word. It means strange or foreign. Xenophobia means fear of strangers.

XER, XERO - This is part of a word. It means dry. Xeroderma is dry skin.

Y **Y CHROMOSOME** - the part of a gene that makes a baby a boy. Only boys have a Y chromosome.

Z **ZOO** - This is part of a word. It means animals. Zoology means the study of animals.

ZYGOMATIC - bones on the face below the eyes. Cheekbones are a type of these bones.

ZYGOTE - a single cell that forms when a sperm and egg join

Rx Riddles Solved!

Doctors, pharmacists and others use a medical “shorthand.” What difference does it make if your doctor’s handwriting isn’t legible? It might mean the difference between AP and ap!

āā	- ana, so much of each
a.c.	- ante cibum, before meals
ad effect	- until effective
ad lib	- as much as desired
AP	- ante partum, before childbirth
ap	- ante prandium, before dinner
aq	- aqua, water
bid	- bis in die, twice each day
ċ	- cum, with
dbl	- double
h.s.	- hora somni, at bedtime
i.d.	- idem, the same
IM	- intramuscular
k	- constant
mb	- misce bene, mix well
MDR	- minimum daily requirement
MED	- minimum effective dose
npo	- nil per os, nothing by mouth
ō	- nono, without
O.D.	- oculus dexter, right eye
O.S.	- oculus sinister, left eye
ṑ	- post, after
per os	- by mouth
prn	- pro re nata, as needed
qh	- quaque hora, every hour
qid	- quater in die, four times each day
qv	- quantum vis, as much as you wish
Rx	- recipe, prescription
STAT	- statim, immediately
sum	- sumat, let it be taken
T or T°	- temperature
t	- time
tid	- ter in die, three times each day
ut dict	- ut dictum, as directed
vid	- see
w	- weight
w/	- with
X	- unknown factor

Diagnosing Web sites

The Medical Library Association (MLA) finds the following Web sites particularly useful. For a current list of MLA's "Top Ten Most Useful Web sites," visit <http://www.mlanet.org>

Cancer.gov

<http://www.cancer.gov/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

<http://www.cdc.gov/>

familydoctor.org

<http://familydoctor.org/>

healthfinder®

<http://www.healthfinder.gov/>

HIV InSite

<http://hivinsite.ucsf.edu/>

KidsHealth®

<http://www.kidshealth.org/>

Mayo Clinic

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/>

MEDEM: an information partnership of medical societies

http://medem.com/MedLB/medlib_entry.cfm

MEDLINEplus

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/>

NOAH: New York Online Access to Health

<http://www.noah-health.org/>

The Consumer and Patient Health Information Section (CAPHIS) of MLA evaluates Web sites based on the following criteria: credibility, sponsorship/authorship, content, audience, currency, disclosure, purpose, links, design, interactivity, and disclaimers. See the consumer health directory at http://caphis.mlanet.org/directory/find_a_library.html



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