

Medspeak In Plain Language

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Many Americans have questions about HIV/AIDS. 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 HIV/AIDS-related “medspeak” terms. We wrote this to make it easier to understand what a doctor or nurse tells you about HIV/AIDS. 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 HIV/AIDS

Medspeak

- A** **ACUTE HIV INFECTION** – is the early stage of HIV infection. It is when a person is first infected with HIV. HIV means human immunodeficiency virus. It can cause AIDS.
- ADHERENCE** – means carefully following instructions. It means taking the right medicine at the right time.
- ADIPOCYTE** – is a cell. It stores energy as fat.
- ADJUVANT** – a material or treatment that helps another treatment work better
- AIDS** – is Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome. People with AIDS have trouble fighting off infections. They get sick very easily. It is caused by HIV.
- AMINO ACID** – chemical mixture needed by the body to make protein.
- ANTIBODIES** – proteins that the body makes to protect the body from bacteria and viruses
- ANTIGEN** – is any substance that triggers the body to fight infection
- ANTIRETROVIRAL THERAPY (ART) or HIGHLY ACTIVE ANTIRETROVIRAL THERAPY or TREATMENT (HAART)** – the combination of three or more medicines given to HIV patients to slow down HIV infection. These medicines can be called a “cocktail.”
- APHTHOUS ULCER** – is a painful sore in the mouth. It can be called a canker sore.
- APOPTOSIS** – is your body getting rid of old and damaged cells
- ATROPHY** – when a body part, cells, or tissue decrease in size or shrink
- B** **B-CELLS** – a type of white blood cell. It helps to fight infections and viruses.
- B.I.D.** – means two times a day. You take your medicine once in the morning and once at night.
- BONE MARROW SUPPRESSION** – some drugs make this happen. There are fewer blood cells. The bone marrow can't work as well to make blood cells.
- BUFFALO HUMP** – extra fat on the upper back and neck. It is caused by taking HIV drugs.
- C** **CACHEXIA** – extreme weight loss due to illness. This can happen in AIDS patients.
- CD4 CELLS** – white blood cells that help other cells fight infection. CD4 cells are the main target of HIV infection. A CD4 count below 200 means a person has AIDS.
- COMPLETE (COMPLETER) BLOOD COUNT (CBC)** – a count of your blood cells. It includes separate counts of your red and different types of white blood cells.

CYTOKINES – are made by CD4 cells. They are proteins that pass messages from cell to cell. Some messages tell a cell to grow. Other messages tell them to stop growing.

CYTOTOXIC T LYMPHOCYTE (CTL) – a T-cell that can find and break apart the cells that have a virus inside them

D **DNA (DEOXYRIBONUCLEIC ACID)** – this holds the information about things like hair color and eye color. It is found in each cell. Parents pass on their DNA to their children.

DORSOCERVICAL FAT PAD – the same as a “Buffalo hump.” Extra fat on the upper back and neck. It is caused by taking HIV drugs.

DRUG-DRUG INTERACTION – a change in the way a drug works when it is taken at the same time as another drug

DRUG RESISTANCE – bacteria, viruses, and parasites that can survive and grow even when drugs that should kill them have been given

E **ENZYME-LINKED IMMUNOABSORBANT ASSAY (ELISA)** – a test to see if the blood has HIV in it. Most often it is the first test done. If the test shows HIV in the blood, a second test is done to make sure.

ENTRY INHIBITORS – These are drugs. They stop HIV from going into healthy T-cells in the body.

F **FIXED-DOSE COMBINATION** – two or more drugs in one pill. People can take fewer pills because one pill takes the place of two pills.

FUSION INHIBITORS – a newer kind of drug for HIV. It slows the HIV virus from holding onto the cell. This may stop the cell from getting infected.

G **GENE** – the smallest part in a body that stores information about how a body will look. Genes pass this information from parent to child.

GENETIC MATERIAL – mostly DNA. It holds the trait information of an organism.

GENOTYPIC ASSAY (Genotypic Antiretroviral Resistance Test or GART) – a blood test to see if drugs can fight the HIV virus or not

H **HALF-LIFE** – the time it takes for only half the original amount of a drug to still be in your body

HEPATIC STEATOSIS – when there is too much fat inside your liver. Also known as “fatty liver”

HIV – means Human Immunodeficiency Virus. This virus causes AIDS.

HIV VIRAL SET POINT – This is when the virus level stays the same after it first goes into the body.

HUMAN IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS TYPE 1 (HIV-1) – the virus that causes AIDS most of the time. It weakens the immune system. Your body cannot fight off diseases. A person can get this virus from bodily fluids.

HUMAN IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS TYPE 2 (HIV-2) – This is like HIV-1 but not as strong. It develops more slowly. Some of the drugs that work to fight HIV-1 do not work for people infected with HIV-2.

I IMMUNE DEFICIENCY (or IMMUNODEFICIENCY) – This is when the body can't fight germs or viruses. You may be born like this (primary immunodeficiency). Or, a disease can make it happen (secondary immunodeficiency).

INCUBATION PERIOD – This is the time between when a person is infected by a disease and when they start to get sick.

INFECTION – when germs get inside the body and make you sick

INTEGRASE – This is part of the HIV virus that puts its own information into cells.

K KAPOSÍ'S SARCOMA (KS) – This is a cancer that happens sometimes when people get AIDS. It causes blood vessels to enlarge. The skin can have pink or purple spots or small bumps. This cancer can also be inside the body in the intestines, lymph nodes, or lungs. It is life-threatening. People with KS also have AIDS.

L LEUKOCYTES – These are white blood cells.

LEUKOPENIA – a lower than normal count of white blood cells

LYMPHOCYTE – This is one kind of white blood cell. They fight viruses. The two main types are B-cells and T-cells

M MACROPHAGE – This is a white blood cell that eats germs and bad cells.

N NEUTROPENIA – This is when you have a low number of one kind of white blood cell. This can happen with HIV infection.

NUCLEOSIDE – This is what helps make nucleic acids. Nucleic acids help make up your genetic material.

NUCLEOSIDE ANALOGS – This is a kind of drug that fights HIV. They don't let the virus make copies of itself.

NUCLEOSIDE/NUCLEOTIDE REVERSE TRANSCRIPTASE INHIBITORS (NRTI, or Nukes) – This is a drug that has fake copies of nucleosides. The fake copies enter the virus. Then healthy cells can't get the virus.

NON-NUCLEOSIDE REVERSE TRANSCRIPTASE INHIBITORS (NNRTI, or non Nukes) – This is a kind of drug that does not let the virus make more viruses.

O OPPORTUNISTIC INFECTION – This is when someone’s body can’t fight germs or viruses because they are sick already.

ORGANISM – a life form such as an animal, bacteria, cell, germ, plant, virus

OSTEOPOROSIS – This is when the inside part of your bones get thinner. It can happen when someone gets old. HIV drugs can make it happen too.

P PATHOGEN – is something that can make you sick

PERINATAL TRANSMISSION – This is when a mother who has HIV can give it to her baby. It happens when the baby is born. It can happen when she breastfeeds the baby. Sometimes it is called mother-to-child transmission.

PHENOTYPE ASSAY – This is a laboratory test to show what drugs work best against HIV.

PROPHYLAXIS – This is when someone takes medicine to keep from getting sick.

PROTEASE INHIBITORS (PIs) – a class of drugs that stop the HIV virus from copying itself. PIs can limit HIV copying in cells that are already sick.

PROTEINS – are made up of amino acids. They are necessary for the body to work correctly.

Q Q.D. – means “every day.” You need to take your medicine at the same time once a day or every 24 hours.

Q.I.D. – means “four times each day.” You need to take your medicine four times each day or every six hours.

R RAPID TEST – a laboratory test to see if you have HIV. This test takes less than 60 minutes. A positive Rapid Test result does not always mean you have HIV. A second test called a HIV Western Blot test will be done.

RECOMBINANT DNA TECHNOLOGY – This means how genetic materials go from one cell to another.

RETROVIRUS – a type of virus that has RNA material. It can make many copies of itself. HIV is a retrovirus.

REVERSE TRANSCRIPTASE – a chemical needed by the HIV virus to copy itself

REVERSE TRANSCRIPTASE INHIBITORS (RTIs) – These are drugs that slow down reverse transcriptase.

RNA (RIBONUCLEIC ACID) – This is like DNA. RNA changes the DNA plan to make proteins.

RYAN WHITE COMPREHENSIVE AIDS RESOURCES EMERGENCY ACT (CARE) – CARE helps people living with HIV/AIDS and their families find and pay for care.

S SALVAGE OR RESCUE THERAPY – Sometimes certain drugs no longer help people with HIV. This is another way to make them better.

SEROCONVERSION – This is when the body makes higher amounts of antibodies. Antibodies can fight HIV.

SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASE (STD) – This is a disease you can get from having sex.

STANDARD TREATMENT – This is the way doctors treat a disease most of the time.

T T-CELL – measuring the levels of anti-HIV drugs in a person's blood to help improve the drug's effect and reduce side effects

THERAPEUTIC DRUG MONITORING (TDM) – measures how much of a drug is in your blood. TDM helps make sure that the medicines are at the right level. The medicine then works best.

U UNDETECTABLE VIRAL LOAD (UD VL) – This is when you don't have much virus in your body. A test does not find the small amount. You can still give the virus to someone else.

V VACCINE – drugs that keep you from getting a disease. They can be given by mouth or in a shot. For example, flu shots are a vaccine.

VIRAL LOAD – the amount of the HIV virus in the blood

VIRAL REBOUND – a large increase in the amount of HIV virus in your blood. It happens even though you are taking your medications. It may mean that the medications are not working as well as before.

VIRUS – a tiny germ that causes diseases. They cannot be cured by drugs. Measles and chicken pox are caused by viruses.

W WASTING SYNDROME – This is a big weight loss. You may have fever and diarrhea.

WESTERN BLOT – a type of blood test to see how hard the body is fighting a virus

WHITE BLOOD CELLS – These are cells that fight germs in the body. AIDS makes people have fewer white blood cells. Then people can get sick easier.

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
c̄	- 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
p̄	- 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 HIV/AIDS Web sites

MLA finds the following Web sites particularly useful for understanding HIV/AIDS. For a current list, visit <http://www.mlanet.org>

AIDSinfo

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)
<http://www.aidsinfo.nih.gov/>

Web site features: the latest federally approved information on HIV/AIDS clinical research, treatment and prevention, and medical practice guidelines for people living with HIV/AIDS, their families and friends, health care providers, scientists and researchers

THE BODY (Complete HIV/AIDS Resource)

Body Health Resources Corporation
<http://www.thebody.com/>

Web site features: basic information, prevention and testing, treatment, 'ask the experts' page, statistics, policy and advocacy, hotlines and local organization listings

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

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

Web site features: national list of HIV testing sites, best-evidence interventions, basic information, fact sheets, brochures, journal articles and special reports

HIV Insite

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

Web site features: the latest information on HIV/AIDS treatment, prevention, and policy

MEDLINEplus® from the National Library of Medicine

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

Web site features: latest news, overviews, diagnosis/symptoms, treatment, prevention, clinical trials, research and glossaries

NOAH: New York Online Access to Health

<http://www.noah-health.org/en/infectious/aids/>

Web site features: definitions, care and treatment, causes and risk factors, warning signs, diagnostic test information and descriptions about surgical procedures

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 library at <http://caphis.mlanet.org/consumer/index.html>

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