

## The Language of Medicine

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Many everyday terms that we use to describe our health and our medical care go back to the early history of civilization. The language of medicine dates to the time when people had only spoken language, not written.

Ancient people gave names to parts of their bodies, to illnesses, and to the cures they used. Some of these names survive in the roots and words still used today in medical terminology. For example, the ancient Greeks thought of the disease we call “cancer” as something eating at a person on the inside, and so named the condition karkinos, meaning both crab and cancer.

Medical terminology began to become standardized when Hippocrates (460–377 B.C.), a Greek physician, set about to organize an approach to medicine. The Hippocratic oath that is generally attributed to him has been in use for over 2,000 years.

### **Derivation of Medical Terminology**

Many medical terms originate directly from ancient Greek or Latin terms. For example, the word nerve is derived from the Latin **nervus**. Later, people of many cultures used these ancient terms in their languages. Even though the appearance of the words changed, the roots from which the words developed remained the original Greek or Latin terms.

Over the subsequent centuries, people involved in medicine and the development of treatments tended to look for Greek or Latin words or roots to describe their newest discoveries. Many medical terms used today are based on

ancient Greek and Latin. Word building became and remains the primary way to describe new medical discoveries.

### **Spelling and Pronunciation of Medical Terms**

Misspellings and mispronunciations in a medical setting can result in life-threatening situations. A misspelled or a misunderstood abbreviation for a medicine dosage was responsible for the death of several children in a cancer ward.

Aside from the possibility of written mistakes, people in health care must remain vigilant in checking and rechecking verbal instructions. Misspellings that result in harm to a patient may become legal issues. Patients have the right to expect a certain standard of care. Misunderstandings caused by incorrect or misspelled words may be disastrous in certain circumstances.

Learning how to spell and pronounce medical terms is a matter of practice. Familiarizing yourself with correct spellings of terms is a matter of practice and of seeing the terms over and over again. Pronouncing a word out loud each time you see the pronunciation will help familiarize you with the sound of the word. You may also want to write and pronounce terms several terms or work with a partner writing and pronouncing terms to each other.

### **Forming Medical Terms**

Medical words are made up of the following word parts: **roots**, **suffixes**, and **prefixes**. Not all medical words have all three parts, but we will start by looking at an example that does. The word is **perineuritis**. It means inflammation around a nerve. When you break the word into its word parts you will have the following:

peri-	neur	-itis
<b>prefix</b>	<b>root</b>	<b>suffix</b>
around	nerve	inflammation

### How to know the meaning of a new word:

#### 1. Use the context of the paragraph as a clue

Example: The patient was **hostile** when the doctor approached the bed. *The patient sat up in bed with his arms folded and looked in the other direction as soon as the doctor started to speak.* Explanation: As described in these sentences, **hostile** means unfriendly

Example: The patient developed a **voracious** appetite after surgery. *In one day he ate enough to equivalent to three days of meals.* Explanation: Because the patient ate an extraordinary amount, **voracious** means extremely hungry or greedy.

#### 2. Use the knowledge of word parts:

- a. **Look to the composition of the word and identify the parts:** prefix-root-suffix.
- b. **Define the meaning of the parts:** start with the suffix. Find out what it means. Then go to the beginning of the word. It will be either a prefix or a root. Find out what it means. If there is another part, it will be a root. Once you have all the meanings, put them together.

#### 3. Lastly, use a dictionary!