

# Medical Terminology Basics

A practical beginner-friendly guide to understanding how medical terms are built, interpreted, and translated into clearer everyday language.

|                            |                               |                                |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <b>LEARN</b><br>Word parts | <b>BUILD</b><br>Medical terms | <b>APPLY</b><br>Plain language |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|

**Designed for: healthcare English learners, healthcare students, international medical professionals, and anyone beginning to study medical vocabulary.**

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# 1. How Medical Terms Are Built

Many medical terms can be understood by separating them into smaller word parts. The three most useful parts for beginners are prefixes, roots, and suffixes.

| Word part | What it does             | Example      | Meaning            |
|-----------|--------------------------|--------------|--------------------|
| Prefix    | Appears at the beginning | tachy-cardia | fast heart rate    |
| Root      | Carries the core meaning | cardi-ology  | study of the heart |
| Suffix    | Appears at the end       | arthr-itis   | joint inflammation |

A connecting vowel, often **o**, may join word parts. For example, **cardi/o/logy** combines the heart root with a suffix meaning study of.

**Quick rule: Do not rely only on memorization. Look for recognizable word parts first.**

## 2. Common Prefixes

| Prefix | Meaning             | Example      |
|--------|---------------------|--------------|
| hyper- | high / above normal | hypertension |
| hypo-  | low / below normal  | hypoglycemia |
| brady- | slow                | bradycardia  |
| tachy- | fast                | tachypnea    |
| peri-  | around              | pericardium  |
| intra- | within              | intravenous  |
| sub-   | under / below       | subcutaneous |

### 3. Common Medical Roots

Roots often identify the body part, organ, tissue, or concept at the center of the term.

| Root          | Meaning                | Example      |
|---------------|------------------------|--------------|
| cardi/o       | heart                  | cardiology   |
| derm/dermat/o | skin                   | dermatology  |
| gastr/o       | stomach                | gastritis    |
| hepat/o       | liver                  | hepatology   |
| nephr/o       | kidney                 | nephrology   |
| neur/o        | nerve / nervous system | neurology    |
| oste/o        | bone                   | osteoporosis |
| arthr/o       | joint                  | arthritis    |
| hemat/o       | blood                  | hematology   |
| pulmon/o      | lung                   | pulmonary    |

### 4. Common Suffixes

| Suffix  | Meaning            | Example      |
|---------|--------------------|--------------|
| -itis   | inflammation       | tonsillitis  |
| -ectomy | surgical removal   | appendectomy |
| -ology  | study of           | cardiology   |
| -algia  | pain               | neuralgia    |
| -emia   | blood condition    | anemia       |
| -megaly | enlargement        | cardiomegaly |
| -scopy  | visual examination | endoscopy    |

## 5. Vocabulary by Body System

Use these terms as a starting point for recognizing common healthcare vocabulary.

| System          | Selected terms                                              |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| Cardiovascular  | heart, artery, vein, pulse, blood pressure, circulation     |
| Respiratory     | lung, airway, breathing, oxygen, cough, shortness of breath |
| Digestive       | stomach, intestine, liver, nausea, vomiting, digestion      |
| Musculoskeletal | bone, joint, muscle, tendon, movement, swelling             |
| Nervous         | brain, spinal cord, nerve, sensation, weakness, dizziness   |
| Urinary         | kidney, bladder, urine, urination, frequency, burning       |

## 6. Medical Terms and Plain Language

Clear communication often means translating technical terminology into words a patient can understand.

| Medical term | Possible plain-language explanation        |
|--------------|--------------------------------------------|
| hypertension | high blood pressure                        |
| edema        | swelling caused by fluid buildup           |
| dyspnea      | shortness of breath / difficulty breathing |
| fracture     | a broken bone                              |
| benign       | not cancerous                              |
| oral         | by mouth                                   |
| bilateral    | on both sides                              |

## 7. Practice Activities

### Activity A - Match the word part

Write the correct meaning beside each item.

| Word part | Your answer |
|-----------|-------------|
| cardi/o   | _____       |
| -itis     | _____       |
| hyper-    | _____       |
| nephr/o   | _____       |
| brady-    | _____       |

### Activity B - Break down the term

Identify any prefix, root, or suffix you recognize and write the likely meaning.

| Term         | Word parts / meaning |
|--------------|----------------------|
| tachycardia  | _____                |
| gastritis    | _____                |
| nephrology   | _____                |
| subcutaneous | _____                |

### Activity C - Say it more clearly

Rewrite each phrase in patient-friendly language.

1. The patient has bilateral lower-extremity edema.

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Take this medication orally twice daily.

\_\_\_\_\_

## 8. Quick Reference and Learning Check

### Mini Learning Check

1. Which suffix commonly means inflammation?
2. Which root refers to the heart?
3. What does the prefix *hypo-* generally indicate?
4. In plain language, what does *dyspnea* mean?
5. Why is plain-language communication useful in healthcare?

### Answer Key

1. **-itis**
2. **cardi/o**
3. **low or below normal**
4. **shortness of breath or difficulty breathing**
5. It can help make information easier to understand and support clearer communication.

### Study Tips

- Learn a small group of roots, prefixes, and suffixes at a time.
- Practice breaking unfamiliar terms into word parts.
- Connect each term to a body system or clinical context.
- Practice translating technical terms into plain language.
- Review frequently rather than trying to memorize everything at once.

### Educational Scope

This resource is designed for education, vocabulary development, and communication practice. It does not provide medical advice, diagnosis, treatment guidance, clinical protocols, or institution-specific procedures. Healthcare decisions should follow appropriate professional training, clinical judgment, and applicable policies.

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