

Medical Terminology

Medical terminology refers to a special vocabulary used by medical professionals. Far from being used to bewilder those not trained in healthcare, it is an essential aid in consistent communication between medical professionals. Medical terminology is used consistently in medicolegal reporting. This week we are going to look at how medical words are formed, to enable you to analyse and understand some of the lingo used in Independent Medical Reports.

Medical words are derived from Greek and Latin. This allows for consistency internationally.

Medical words are made up of several component parts - **Prefix, Suffix and Root or Stem words** – these words generally maintain the same meaning whenever they appear.

The Prefix

The prefix is the beginning part of the word that precedes the word root and changes its meaning. It is a directional term.

Prefix	Meaning	Example
A-	Without, absence of	Asymptomatic = Without symptoms
An-	Against, opposite	Antacid = Against acid
Brady-	Slow	Bradycardia = Slow heart rate
Tachy-	Fast or rapid	Tachycardia = Fast heart rate
Hypo-	Low, less than normal	Hypoglycaemia = Low blood sugar
Hyper-	High, more than normal	Hypertension = High blood pressure
Epi-	Above	Epigastric = Upper region of the abdomen
Peri-	Around	Periotomy = Incision around the cornea

The Root Word

The root word is the basic central construction of a medical word and in the absence of a prefix it will be found at the beginning of, or more commonly, in the middle of a word.

A root word may be accompanied by combining a vowel with a suffix. It often denotes a body part, for example, "ceph" means brain and "glyc" means sugar.

Mostly derived from Greek and Latin they tell you the 'where' and 'what it is we are talking about' of the word. Almost every medical word can be broken down into some combination of prefixes, roots, and suffixes. Because they are the core meaning of the word, there are many root words.

Meaning	Root Word	Example
Muscle	Myo-	Myocardium = Heart muscle
Skull	Crani-, Capit-	Craniotomy = Removal of part of the cranium
Brain	Enceph-	Encephalitis = Inflammation of the brain
Eyes	Ocul, Ophthalm	Oculoplastics = Plastic surgery around the eyes
Chest	Thorac-	Thoracotomy = Surgical opening of the chest
Rib	Pleur-, Cost-	Intercostal Muscle = Muscle between the ribs

The Suffix

The suffix is found at the end of the word. It adds to or modifies the meaning of the root word. It usually specifies the procedure, condition or disease. Specifically it tells you 'what's going on'.

Suffix	Meaning	Example
-Algia	Pain	Neuralgia = Pain following the course of a nerve
-cide	Kill, destroy	Spermicide = Kills sperm
-Cyte	Cell	Leucocyte = White blood cell
-Gram	Written, recorded	Electrocardiogram = tracing of electrical activity of heart
-itis	Inflammation	Tonsillitis = Inflammation of the tonsils
-malacia	Soft	Osteomalacia = Softening of bone
-ology	Study/science of	Cytology = Study of cells
-pathy	Disease	Neuropathy = Disease of the nerves

The Combining Vowel

Combining vowels are added to root words to aid pronunciation and connect root words to suffixes.

Encephal + o + pathy = Encephalopathy – it would sound a bit strange without the 'O'.

There are many exceptions to the rules of medical terminology, however, this basic theory of breaking down long medical words into easier to understand segments should assist in the comprehension of some, although definitely not all, of the words, terms and phrases that one may stumble across when reading an Independent Medical Report.