Del Norte Triplicate NEWS

Making Sense of Medical Language

By Gigi Reed, MD November 5, 2026

Patients often tell me that some medical words are very hard to say, or learn, or understand. I agree and offer a little decoding guide:

Starting with the basics: A prefix begins a word and often describes location, speed, or amount. A suffix ends a word and commonly identifies a condition, symptom, or procedure. Between them, a root often identifies the body part involved.

Let’s look at some commonly encountered medical word parts and the everyday terms they help explain.

One of medicine’s most recognizable ending is: -itis, which signals inflammation. Arthritis means joint inflammation, dermatitis means skin inflammation, and thyroiditis means inflammation of the thyroid gland.

Pain has its own ending: -algia. Myalgia means muscle pain, neuralgia means nerve pain, and arthralgia means joint pain. The distinction between arthralgia and arthritis matters: one describes pain, while the other describes inflammation.

The ending: -pathy appears in terms describing disease or damage: Neuropathy refers to nerve disease or damage, while cardiomyopathy describes disease of the heart muscle.

The ending: -oma appears in names of tumors and masses. A lipoma is a fatty-tissue tumor, while lymphoma is a cancer involving lymphatic cells. The ending alone does not necessarily tell whether a growth is benign or malignant.

When an organ is enlarged, its name may include: -megaly. Cardiomegaly means an enlarged heart, spleenomegaly an enlarged spleen and hepatomegaly means an enlarged liver.

The ending: -emia points toward a condition involving the blood. Hyperglycemia means high blood glucose in the blood, while bacteremia means bacteria are present in the bloodstream.

Procedures also have their own word suffix. The ending: -ectomy means surgical removal. An appendectomy removes the appendix, a tonsillectomy removes the tonsils, and a thyroidectomy removes thyroid tissue.

The ending: -plasty describes repair or reshaping. Rhinoplasty involves reshaping or repairing the nose, while angioplasty is a procedure used to widen a narrowed blood vessel.

Looking Inside can have the ending: -scopy

A colonoscopy examines the colon, while arthroscopy examines the inside of a joint. The related ending -scope names the instrument: a colonoscope is the tool; colonoscopy is the examination.

The beginning of a word can also be important.

The prefix: hyper- signals an increased or excessive level. Hypertension means high blood pressure, hyperglycemia means high blood glucose, and hyperthyroidism describes an overactive thyroid.

The opposite pattern is denoted with hypo-. Hypotension means low blood pressure, while hypothyroidism describes an underactive thyroid.

The prefix: tachy-: means fast. Tachycardia means a fast heart rate, while tachypnea means rapid breathing.

The counterpart to tachy- is brady-. Bradycardia means a slow heart rate, and bradypnea means slow breathing.

Together, these prefixes help describe how quickly a body function occurs.

The prefix: intra- identifies a location inside a structure. Intravenous means within a vein, while intramuscular means within a muscle.

Under or below is denoted with the prefix: sub-.

Subcutaneous means under the skin, and sublingual means under the tongue. Sublingual nitroglycerin is put under the tongue and gets absorbed into the bloodstream from there.

Both of these terms are often encountered when discussing how a medicine is administered.

The prefix peri- means around. The pericardium is the sac surrounding the heart, while periorbital refers to the area around the eye socket.

When combined, these words now hopefully make more sense. In cardiomyopathy, the pieces identify the heart, muscle, and disease. In hyperglycemia, they identify an above-normal level of glucose in the blood.

Learning these common building blocks can make medical conversations, or reading reports less intimidating – and maybe even a little fun.