

1: Word Building Basics

by 3andB Staff Writer | April 18, 2025

CNA Standard MT 1.1: Basic Word Structure

Building Blocks of Medical Language: Understanding Word Parts

Medical terminology might seem like a foreign language at first, but it follows logical patterns that make it easier to learn than you might think. Healthcare professionals use specialized vocabulary to communicate precisely about the body, diseases, treatments, and procedures. Understanding how medical terms are constructed helps you decode their meanings and use them correctly.

Breaking Down the Structure

Medical terms are built using word parts: prefixes, roots, suffixes, and combining forms. Like building blocks, these pieces fit together to create words with specific meanings. The root carries the essential meaning of the word, while prefixes and suffixes modify that meaning.

For example, in the term “cardiologist,” “cardi” is the root meaning “heart,” and “ologist” is the suffix meaning “one who studies.” Together, they form “cardiologist”—a physician who specializes in heart medicine.



The building blocks of medical terminology involve understanding how prefixes, roots, and suffixes combine to form the foundation of healthcare communication.

Combining Forms: The Connective Tissue

Combining forms are root words with a vowel (usually “o”) added to connect them to suffixes or other roots. This connector makes pronunciation easier. For instance, “gastro” is the combining form of “gastr” (stomach), allowing terms like “gastroenterology” to flow smoothly.

Key Medical Word Parts You Should Know

Understanding common word parts empowers you to decode thousands of medical terms:

Root Words:

- “Cardi/o” (heart)
- “Dermat/o” (skin)
- “Hepat/o” (liver)
- “Neur/o” (nerve)
- “Oste/o” (bone)

Prefixes:

- “Hyper-” (excessive, above normal)
- “Hypo-” (deficient, below normal)
- “Brady-” (slow)
- “Tachy-” (fast)
- “Dys-” (painful, difficult)

Suffixes:

- “-itis” (inflammation)
- “-ectomy” (surgical removal)
- “-ology” (study of)
- “-osis” (condition, usually abnormal)
- “-plasty” (surgical repair)

Pronunciation Matters

Correct pronunciation ensures clear communication in healthcare settings. Most

medical terms emphasize the syllable before the suffix. Practice saying terms aloud and break complex words into syllables. For example, “appendectomy” becomes “ap-pen-DEC-to-my,” emphasizing “DEC.”

Practical Applications in Healthcare

When you enter a healthcare setting, medical terminology becomes the foundation of all communication. Accurate terminology allows healthcare teams to:

- Document patient conditions precisely
- Communicate efficiently during emergencies
- Ensure proper treatment and medication administration
- Code and bill procedures correctly
- Maintain consistent medical records

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

Be careful with similar-sounding terms that have different meanings. For example, “dysphagia” (difficulty swallowing) and “dysphasia” (language impairment) sound similar but refer to entirely different conditions. One misplaced letter can completely change a diagnosis or treatment plan.

Building Your Medical Vocabulary

The best way to master medical terminology is through consistent practice and application. Start with common terms and gradually build your vocabulary. Create flashcards, use medical terminology apps, and practice using terms in context.

Remember that medical language evolves as healthcare advances. Staying current with terminology changes is part of professional development in any healthcare role.

Patient Education Benefits

As a healthcare professional, you’ll often need to translate complex medical terms into

language patients can understand. This skill—medical literacy translation—builds trust and improves patient outcomes. Studies show that patients who understand their diagnosis and treatment plan are more likely to follow medical advice and experience better health outcomes.

When communicating with patients, you’ll need to find the balance between accuracy and clarity. Rather than eliminating medical terms entirely, you can introduce them alongside everyday explanations. This approach empowers patients while maintaining precision in your communication.

Understanding medical terminology will also help you interpret medical research, participate in continuing education, and collaborate with healthcare teams across different specialties and settings.

Understanding medical terminology is not just about memorizing words—it’s about developing a systematic approach to language that will serve you throughout your healthcare career.

Did You Know?

The word “diagnosis” comes from Greek “dia” (through) and “gnosis” (knowledge)—literally meaning “to know through” or distinguish one disease from another.

About 75% of all medical terms are derived from Greek or Latin origins, which is why learning word parts is more efficient than memorizing thousands of individual terms.

Medical abbreviations can be so confusing that many hospitals have “Do Not Use” lists for certain abbreviations. For example, “U” (for units) is often banned because it can be mistaken for a zero, potentially causing medication dosage errors.

1: Word Building Basics

GUIDED NOTES

Key Terms

Define the following terms:

1. Prefix: _____
2. Root: _____
3. Suffix: _____
4. Combining Form: _____
5. Diagnosis: _____

Main Concept Overview

Fill in the blanks with the appropriate words from the word bank:

Word Bank: pronunciation, Greek, precision, literacy, evolves

1. Medical terms are built using word parts to create words with specific _____.
2. Most medical terms are derived from Latin or _____ origins.
3. Correct _____ ensures clear communication in healthcare settings.
4. Medical language _____ as healthcare advances.
5. Medical _____ translation builds trust and improves patient outcomes.

Matching Section

Match each term with its correct description:

- | | |
|-----------------------|---|
| _____ 1. Cardiologist | A. Surgical removal of an organ or tissue |
| _____ 2. Dysphagia | B. Higher than normal measurement |
| _____ 3. Hyper- | C. Heart specialist |
| _____ 4. -itis | D. Difficulty swallowing |
| _____ 5. -ectomy | E. Inflammation |

True/False Questions

Mark each statement as True (T) or False (F):

- _____ 1. The suffix “-ology” means “surgical repair.”
- _____ 2. In medical terms, the root carries the essential meaning of the word.
- _____ 3. Combining forms typically use the vowel “o” to connect roots to suffixes.
- _____ 4. “Brady-” is a prefix meaning “fast.”
- _____ 5. Patient understanding of medical terminology has no impact on health outcomes.

Fill in the Table

Complete the table below about common word parts used in medical terminology:

Word Part from Article	Your Definition
Cardi/o	
Dermat/o	
Hyper-	
-itis	
-ology	

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Why is it more efficient to learn word parts (prefixes, roots, suffixes) rather than memorizing thousands of individual medical terms? Explain how understanding word parts helps you decode unfamiliar medical terms.

2. How might a healthcare professional translate complex medical terminology when communicating with patients while still maintaining accuracy? Provide specific examples of how you might explain a medical term to a patient.

1: Word Building Basics - Hypotheticals

Scenario 1: Hospital Visit

You are visiting a hospital for the first time as part of your CTE class. You hear a doctor mention that a patient has “cardiology appointment” for “hypertension.”

- a) What part of the body does the root “cardi/o” refer to?
- b) What might “hypertension” mean if “hyper-” means “excessive or above normal”?
- c) How would knowing these word parts help you understand what the patient is being treated for?

Scenario 2: Medical Chart

You are practicing reading simple medical notes in your healthcare class. You see the term “dermatitis” in a patient’s file.

- a) What does the root “dermat/o” tell you about what part of the body is affected?
- b) What does the suffix “-itis” tell you about the condition?
- c) If you combine your answers from a) and b), what is dermatitis in simple terms?

Scenario 3: Medication Label

Your teacher shows the class a medication label that includes the word “hepatoprotective.”

- a) What body part does “hepat/o” refer to?
- b) Based on the name, what might this medication do for the patient?
- c) Why is it helpful to recognize common word roots when learning about medications?

Scenario 4: Patient Information

You are creating a simple patient education handout. You need to explain that a patient will have a “gastroscopy” procedure.

- a) What part of the body does “gastr/o” refer to?
- b) How might you explain this procedure to a patient using everyday language?
- c) Why is it important for healthcare workers to translate medical terms for patients?

1: Word Building Basics - Reflection Questions

#1

How might understanding medical terminology change the way you communicate in healthcare settings?

Think about times when precise communication is critical in healthcare. Consider how using the correct medical terms could affect patient care and teamwork.

#2

In what ways could your knowledge of medical word parts help you in an emergency situation?

Consider scenarios where you might need to quickly understand or communicate medical information. How would recognizing common prefixes, roots, and suffixes be valuable?

#3

Why is it important to know both medical terms and everyday explanations for the same conditions?

Consider the different audiences you might communicate with in healthcare. How would your approach differ when speaking with colleagues versus patients?

TERM	DEFINITION
Combining Form	
Compound Term	
Diagnosis	
Etymology	
Prefix	
Pronunciation	
Root	
Suffix	
Terminology	
Word Building	

1: WORD SEARCH

Word Building Basics

P D A N X Q S P R O N U N C I A T I O N B W X Y
S I C G C J Q G T P Z Q U D W F R T R Y L K X X
T V D K K O V Y H P M R U J W U V Q V J F N Y N
Y F J X O A M L U Q S G W L O T S L U N S H Q H
A F Q I R R H P S Q P P X O G Y J C T P E L D C
V U P K M E L Y O M L R J Z R K B A Z A L H H S
W X A U D N G Q J U M L X T S D P R E F I X T S
C S Y E Y M G G R W N H G S W V B K B N K P B Z
L B R V X N C J U I J D Q T M Z S U A R M B E Z
D Q E B B Y O S G Z K J T S R Q K G I M B C V R
O T G U L B M J Y U S U B E C L K J C L C V Q V
A F V O I U B W D N I I I Y R Y R R V Y D X U W
U Z P F D X I W V B L W L Y E M T W W A J I Z R
W Q D Z X C N R H B T E R M I N O L O G Y P N Z
K D D I T G I O K E U D X Q S S O G V C T C M G
M X S I G U N I S Y O I G V R I H G F E G I B R
T H E T S S G X Q T E S L O I S S W T T O Z N M
Q B O X T Z F H T V B U X D J D X O W Y W J M Z
K N E K H Y O J E K Y F W C I C F O R M T J S T
C R X P P U R Z P O L F Y U W N W S W O W B P R
T D O Z Y V M N O Z I I I S D N G X F L O F X Z
X I C O W H B R I N A X J F H G D J R O O M P Z
J D X T T X E M E B L E H U G Z L Q Q G Z Q K A
H M L R W G K D I A G N O S I S V L P Y G T C W

Word Building

Compound Term

Combining Form

Terminology

Suffix

Root

Pronunciation

Prefix

Etymology

Diagnosis

Word Building Basics

Across

5. The process of constructing medical terms by combining prefixes, roots, and suffixes according to established patterns.

Word _____

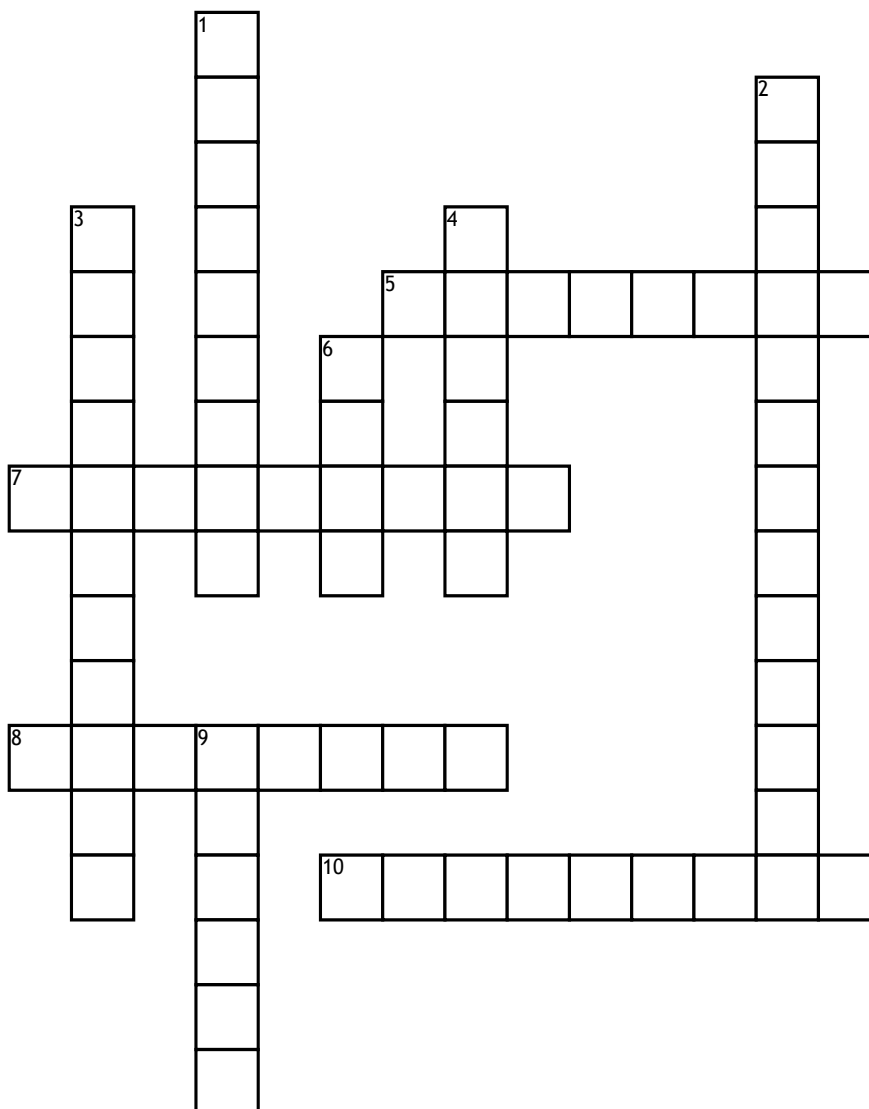
7. The identification of the nature of an illness or problem.

8. A medical term that contains multiple roots; allows for precise description of complex anatomical structures or medical conditions.

Term _____

10. A root word plus a vowel (usually "o") that connects it to suffixes or other roots to make pronunciation easier.

Form _____



Down

1. The study of the origin of words and the historical development of their meanings; important in understanding the foundation of medical terminology.

2. The way in which a word is spoken; particularly important in medical settings to ensure clear communication.

3. The body of terms used with a particular technical application; in healthcare, specialized vocabulary used to communicate precisely.

4. The word part added to the end of a root that modifies its meaning; examples include "-itis" (inflammation) and "-ectomy" (surgical removal).

6. The core part of a medical term that carries the primary meaning; examples include "cardi" (heart) and "dermat" (skin).

9. The word part added to the beginning of a root that modifies its meaning; examples include "hyper-" (excessive) and "hypo-" (deficient).