

# Understanding Medical Terms

---

At first glance, medical terminology can seem like a foreign language. But often the key to understanding medical terms is focusing on their components (prefixes, roots, and suffixes). For example, *spondylosis* is a combination of “spondylo,” which means vertebra, and “lysis,” which means dissolve, and so means dissolution of a vertebra.

The same components are used in many medical terms. “Spondylo” plus “itis,” which means inflammation, forms *spondylitis*, an inflammation of the vertebrae. The same prefix plus “malacia,” which means soft, forms *spondylomalacia*, a softening of the vertebrae.

Knowing the meaning of a small number of components can help with interpretation of a large number of medical terms. The following list defines many commonly used medical prefixes, roots, and suffixes.

|                  |                                    |
|------------------|------------------------------------|
| <b>a(n)</b>      | absence of                         |
| <b>acou, acu</b> | hear                               |
| <b>aden(o)</b>   | gland                              |
| <b>aer(o)</b>    | air                                |
| <b>alg</b>       | pain                               |
| <b>andr(o)</b>   | man                                |
| <b>angi(o)</b>   | vessel                             |
| <b>ankyl(o)</b>  | crooked, curved                    |
| <b>ante</b>      | before                             |
| <b>anter(i)</b>  | front, forward                     |
| <b>anti</b>      | against                            |
| <b>arteri(o)</b> | artery                             |
| <b>arthr(o)</b>  | joint                              |
| <b>articul</b>   | joint                              |
| <b>ather(o)</b>  | fatty                              |
| <b>audi(o)</b>   | hearing                            |
| <b>aur(i)</b>    | ear                                |
| <b>aut(o)</b>    | self                               |
| <b>bi, bis</b>   | double, twice, two                 |
| <b>brachy</b>    | short                              |
| <b>brady</b>     | slow                               |
| <b>bucc(o)</b>   | cheek                              |
| <b>carcin(o)</b> | cancer                             |
| <b>cardi(o)</b>  | heart                              |
| <b>cephal(o)</b> | head                               |
| <b>cerebr(o)</b> | brain                              |
| <b>cervic</b>    | neck                               |
| <b>chol(e)</b>   | bile, or referring to gall-bladder |
| <b>chondr(o)</b> | cartilage                          |
| <b>circum</b>    | around, about                      |
| <b>contra</b>    | against, counter                   |
| <b>corpor</b>    | body                               |
| <b>cost(o)</b>   | rib                                |
| <b>crani(o)</b>  | skull                              |
| <b>cry(o)</b>    | cold                               |

|                    |                                |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|
| <b>cut</b>         | skin                           |
| <b>cyan(o)</b>     | blue                           |
| <b>cyst(o)</b>     | bladder                        |
| <b>cyt(o)</b>      | cell                           |
| <b>dactyl(o)</b>   | finger or toe                  |
| <b>dent</b>        | tooth                          |
| <b>derm(ato)</b>   | skin                           |
| <b>dipl(o)</b>     | double                         |
| <b>dors</b>        | back                           |
| <b>dys</b>         | bad, faulty, abnormal          |
| <b>ectomy</b>      | excision (removal by cutting)  |
| <b>emia</b>        | blood                          |
| <b>encephal(o)</b> | brain                          |
| <b>end(o)</b>      | inside                         |
| <b>enter(o)</b>    | intestine                      |
| <b>epi</b>         | outer, superficial, upon       |
| <b>erythr(o)</b>   | red                            |
| <b>eu</b>          | normal                         |
| <b>extra</b>       | outside                        |
| <b>gastr(o)</b>    | stomach                        |
| <b>gen</b>         | become, originate              |
| <b>gloss(o)</b>    | tongue                         |
| <b>glyc(o)</b>     | sweet, or referring to glucose |
| <b>gram, graph</b> | write, record                  |
| <b>gyn</b>         | woman                          |
| <b>hem(ato)</b>    | blood                          |
| <b>hemi</b>        | half                           |
| <b>hepat(o)</b>    | liver                          |
| <b>hist(o)</b>     | tissue                         |
| <b>hydr(o)</b>     | water                          |
| <b>hyper</b>       | excessive, high                |
| <b>hypo</b>        | deficient, low                 |
| <b>hyster(o)</b>   | uterus                         |
| <b>iatr(o)</b>     | doctor                         |

|                    |                       |                   |                                 |
|--------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------|
| <b>infra</b>       | beneath               | <b>phleb(o)</b>   | vein                            |
| <b>inter</b>       | among, between        | <b>phob(ia)</b>   | fear                            |
| <b>intra</b>       | inside                | <b>plasty</b>     | repair                          |
| <b>itis</b>        | inflammation          | <b>pleg(ia)</b>   | paralysis                       |
| <b>lact(o)</b>     | milk                  | <b>pnea</b>       | breathing                       |
| <b>lapar(o)</b>    | flank, abdomen        | <b>pneum(ato)</b> | breath, air                     |
| <b>latero</b>      | side                  | <b>pneumon(o)</b> | lung                            |
| <b>leuk(o)</b>     | white                 | <b>pod(o)</b>     | foot                            |
| <b>lingu(o)</b>    | tongue                | <b>poie</b>       | make, produce                   |
| <b>lip(o)</b>      | fat                   | <b>poly</b>       | much, many                      |
| <b>lys(is)</b>     | dissolve              | <b>post</b>       | after                           |
| <b>mal</b>         | bad, abnormal         | <b>poster(i)</b>  | back, behind                    |
| <b>malac</b>       | soft                  | <b>presby</b>     | elder                           |
| <b>mamm(o)</b>     | breast                | <b>proct(o)</b>   | anus                            |
| <b>mast(o)</b>     | breast                | <b>pseud(o)</b>   | false                           |
| <b>megal(o)</b>    | large                 | <b>psych(o)</b>   | mind                            |
| <b>melan(o)</b>    | black                 | <b>pulmon(o)</b>  | lung                            |
| <b>mening(o)</b>   | membranes             | <b>pyel(o)</b>    | pelvis of kidney                |
| <b>my(o)</b>       | muscle                | <b>pyr(o)</b>     | fever, fire                     |
| <b>myc(o)</b>      | fungus                | <b>rachi(o)</b>   | spine                           |
| <b>myel(o)</b>     | marrow                | <b>ren(o)</b>     | kidneys                         |
| <b>nas(o)</b>      | nose                  | <b>rhag</b>       | break, burst                    |
| <b>necr(o)</b>     | death                 | <b>rhe</b>        | flow                            |
| <b>nephr(o)</b>    | kidney                | <b>rhin(o)</b>    | nose                            |
| <b>neur(o)</b>     | nerve                 | <b>scler(o)</b>   | hard                            |
| <b>nutri</b>       | nourish               | <b>scope</b>      | instrument                      |
| <b>ocul(o)</b>     | eye                   | <b>scopy</b>      | examination                     |
| <b>odyn(o)</b>     | pain                  | <b>somat(o)</b>   | body                            |
| <b>oma</b>         | tumor                 | <b>spondyl(o)</b> | vertebra                        |
| <b>onc(o)</b>      | tumor                 | <b>steat(o)</b>   | fat                             |
| <b>oophor(o)</b>   | ovaries               | <b>sten(o)</b>    | narrow, compressed              |
| <b>ophthalm(o)</b> | eye                   | <b>steth(o)</b>   | chest                           |
| <b>opia</b>        | vision                | <b>stom</b>       | mouth, opening                  |
| <b>opsy</b>        | examination           | <b>supra</b>      | above                           |
| <b>orchi(o)</b>    | testes                | <b>tachy</b>      | fast, quick                     |
| <b>osis</b>        | condition             | <b>therap</b>     | treatment                       |
| <b>osse(o)</b>     | bone                  | <b>therm(o)</b>   | heat                            |
| <b>oste(o)</b>     | bone                  | <b>thorac(o)</b>  | chest                           |
| <b>ot(o)</b>       | ear                   | <b>thromb(o)</b>  | clot, lump                      |
| <b>path(o)</b>     | disease               | <b>tomy</b>       | incision (operation by cutting) |
| <b>ped(o)</b>      | child                 | <b>tox(i)</b>     | poison                          |
| <b>penia</b>       | deficient, deficiency | <b>uria</b>       | urine                           |
| <b>peps, pept</b>  | digest                | <b>vas(o)</b>     | vessel                          |
| <b>peri</b>        | around                | <b>ven(o)</b>     | vein                            |
| <b>phag(o)</b>     | eat, destroy          | <b>vesic(o)</b>   | bladder                         |
| <b>pharmaco</b>    | drug                  | <b>xer(o)</b>     | dry                             |
| <b>pharyng(o)</b>  | throat                |                   |                                 |