

Language of Medicine

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Does going to see the doctor cause you anxiety? White washed walls, lots of formidable looking equipment, nurses and staff in uniforms, and having to put your body in the hands of another human being can all be nerve racking. Their explanations about the issue at hand can be even more confusing. Therefore, if you arm yourself with some basic medical terminology when going to see a health care professional you can reduce some of that stress. You will be able to ask more informed questions and feel more comfortable about your visit.

Origins: It is estimated that about three-fourth of our medical terminology is of Greek origin. Since Greeks were the founders of rational medicine in the golden age of Greek civilization in the 5th Century BC, the Hippocratic School and later on GALEN (Greeks from Asia minor who lived in Rome in the 2nd century AD) formulated the theories which dominated medicine up to the beginning of the 18th century. The Hippocrates were the first to describe diseases based on observations and the names given by them to many conditions are still used today. For example arthritis, nephritis, pleuritis – the word “itis” means inflammation. The Greek terms came into the English language through the Latin. The Romans used the Latin alphabet. This generally corresponds to Greek except a few exceptions – for example, Greek “kranion” is translated in English or Latin as “cranium” for skull.

Medical terminology is heard largely in Greek and Latin languages. Some terms are based upon the supposed function of a part. For example, the first cervical vertebra in the neck supporting the head is named as “Atlas” for the famous Greek titan. Latin has accounted for a majority of root words in the English language. Other older roots of medical terminology have their origins in Arabic due to the fact that Arabic scholars were important teachers of medicine. Simplified versions of medical terminology has been derived from Greek, Latin and Arabic for the past half century.

Medical Terms: Medical terms have three basic components – the prefix, the root word, and the

suffix. These three basic components can be used in a variety of ways such as:

Bi – two
Cardio – heart
Hemo – blood
Gastro – stomach
Pnea – breathing
Cardiology – study of heart
Cephalalgis – headaches
Appendectomy – appendix removal
Bronchitis – inflammation of bronchus
Dyspnea – difficulty breathing
Aden – gland
Kranion -- skull
Derma – skin
Stoma – mouth
Trauma – wound
Absorb – take up fluid
Adenopathy – enlarged lymph node
Allergic reaction – rash, trouble breathing
Anemia – decreased red blood cells and low blood count

Some new medical terminology as spoken by lay people is as follows:
Blood clogs - nasty little buggers that are treated as Coumadin
Baby daddy – not a father, not a husband, just a sperm donor
Bumps on the cookie box – is it herpes? Is it warts? Or is it just an infected hair follicle?
The more familiar you make yourself with the basic terms used by health care professionals, the less anxious you will feel during your visit. It is impossible to mention the countless lay terms for the language of medicine. However, if you are interested in learning more, please reference the sites below. These sites are not endorsed by the author.

www.webMD.com
www.myelectronicMD.com
www.merck.com
www.NEJM.org