

WORDS TO WATCH – FACT SHEET

Many people, even highly literate people, have trouble understanding words used in health care. In some instances, a word may be totally unfamiliar. In other cases, a word may be familiar, but the person may not understand it in a health care context. For example, think about a patient being told, “keep your glucose in a normal range.” Does the person understand what *glucose* is? What a *normal range* is? “Range” may be an unfamiliar term (other than as something you cook on). Even people who understand the concept may need more information than the phrase provides.

Many medical words have a Latin or Greek prefix, such as pre-op, post-op, prenatal, premature, unsweetened, decontaminate, antibacterial. These can be difficult to understand for people who have difficulty reading and may not understand these these prefixes.

Four kinds of words cause much of the misunderstanding: **Medical** words, **Concept** words, **Category** words and **Value judgment** words

Often these kinds of words can be made understandable by explaining them with common words, by an example, or by a visual.

Medical Word Examples: Words frequently used by doctors and in health care instructions.

Problem Word	Consider Using
Ailment	Sickness, illness, problem with your health
Benign	Will not cause harm; is not cancer
Condition	How you feel; health problem
Dysfunction	Problem
Inhibitor	Drug that stops something that is bad for you
Intermittent	Off and on
Lesion	Wound , sore; infected patch of skin
Oral	By mouth
Procedure	Something done to treat your problem; operation
Vertigo	Dizziness

Words to watch

Concept Word Examples: Words used to describe an idea, metaphor, or notion.

Problem Word	Consider Using
Active role	Taking part in
Avoid	Stay away from; do not use (or eat)
Collaborate	Work together
Factor	Other thing
Gauge	Measure; get a better idea of; test (dependent on context)
Intake	What you eat or drink; what goes into your body
Landmark	Very important (adj.) Important event; turning point (n.)
Option	Choice
Referral	Ask you to see another doctor; get a second opinion
Wellness	Good health; feeling good

Category Word Examples: Words that describe a group or sub-set, and may be unfamiliar

Problem Word	Consider Using
Activity	Something you do; something you do often, like driving a car
Adverse (reaction)	Bad
Cognitive	Learning; thinking
Hazardous	Not safe; dangerous
High-intensity exercise	Use an example, such as running
Generic	Product sold without a brand name, like ibuprofen
Noncancerous	Not cancer
Poultry	Chicken, turkey, etc.
Prosthesis	Replacement for a body part, such as a man-made arm
Support	Help with your needs – for money, friendship, or care

Words to watch

Value Judgment Word Examples: Words that may need an example or visual to convey their meaning with clarity.

Problem Word	Consider Using
Adequate	Enough Example (adequate water): 6-8 glasses a day
Adjust	Fine-tune; change
Cautiously	With care; slowly Example: making sure to hold on to handrails
Excessive	Too much Example (bleeding): if blood soaks through the bandage
Increase gradually	Add to Example (exercise): add 5 minutes a week
Moderately	Not too much Example (exercise): so you don't get out of breath
Progressive	Gets worse (or better)
Routinely	Often Example: every week; every other day
Significantly	Enough to make a difference Example (smoking/heart disease): 2 times the chance of having heart disease
Temporary	For a limited time; for about (an hour, day...) Example: for less than a week