

Word 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 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

Problem Word	Consider Using
Intermittent	Off and on
Lesion	Wound, sore; infected patch of skin
Oral	By mouth
Procedure	Something done to treat your problem; operation
Vertigo	Dizziness

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

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
Non-cancerous	Not cancer

Problem Word	Consider Using
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

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

Problem Word	Consider Using
Adequate	Enough – For example: Adequate water is 6-8 glasses a day.
Adjust	Fine-tune; change
Cautiously	With care; slowly For example: making sure to hold onto the handrails
Excessive	Too much – For example: Excessive bleeding - if blood soaks through the bandage
Increase gradually	Add to – For example: Add 5 minutes of exercise a week
Moderately	Not too much – For Example: Exercise moderately so you don't get out of breath
Progressive	Gets worse (or better)
Routinely	Often – For Example: every week or every other day

Problem Word	Consider Using
Significantly	Enough to make a difference – For Example: Smoking significantly increases the chance of having heart disease by double
Temporary	For a limited time; for about (an hour, day...)