



Plain Language Toolkit Word List

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The following list contains common medical terms and health care jargon—with suggested alternatives.

Try to use plain, non-medical language whenever possible in both speaking and writing. When working with patients one-on-one, please use professional discretion. If you do need to use complicated or unusual words, be sure to define them as you go.

We update this word list periodically based on feedback from our users. Let us hear from you! You may e-mail your suggestions or comments to patienthealth@ghc.org.

Instead of	Try this ...
abdomen	stomach, tummy, belly
abrasion	scrape, scratch
absorb	take in fluids, soak up
abstain from	don't, don't use, don't have, go without
accompany	go (along) with, come with
accomplish	carry out, do
accordingly	so, for that reason, as a result
accrue	add, gain, build up
accumulate	add, build up, collect, gather
accurate	correct, exact, right
acquire	get
activate	begin, start
acute	sudden, new, recent; intense flare-up, serious pain; short-term
addictive	habit-forming
additional	added, extra, more, other
address	talk about, discuss
adequate	enough
adjacent	next to, by
administer	give
advantageous	helpful, useful
adverse	harmful, bad
adversely impact	hurt, set back
affirmative	yes, positive

aggravate	make worse
aggregate	all together, added together, combined
agitation	anxiety, restlessness, nervousness
ailment	sickness, illness, health problem, complaint
allergen	something that causes allergies
allergic rhinitis	hay fever
alleviate	ease, decrease, lessen
allocate	divide, give based on a plan
allow	let
alopecia	hair loss
alternative	choice, option
ameliorate	improve, get better, make better
ambulate	walk
ambulatory	able to walk
amend	change
ameliorate	improve
analgesic	pain killer, pain reliever
analyze	look at, study, examine
anaphylaxis	shock or serious allergic reaction
anesthetic (general)	a drug that puts you to sleep
anesthetic (local)	a drug that numbs an area of your body
angina (or angina pectoris)	chest pain
anterior	front
anticipate	expect
anticoagulant	blood thinner
anti-inflammatory	helps swelling go down
apparent	clear, plain, show up
appreciate, appreciation	thankful, thanks
apprise	inform, tell
appropriate(ly)	correct(ly), proper(ly), right
approximate(ly)	about, around, roughly
arrhythmia	irregular heartbeat, when the heart doesn't have a steady beat
arteriosclerosis (or atherosclerosis)	hardening of the arteries
articulate	say, state, tell
ascertain	find out, learn
ascorbic acid	vitamin C
asphyxiate, asphyxiation	choke (ing), suffocate (tion)
aspirate, aspiration	fluid in the lungs
assay	lab test

assess	learn about, study
assessment	review, quiz, rating, report, test, interview
assist, assistance	help, aid
associated with	linked to, related to
asymptomatic	without symptoms
atopic dermatitis	itchy red rash
attain	meet a goal; get
attempt	try
audit	review, inspect, look at
aural	hearing
bacteria	germs
beneficial	helpful, good
benefit (noun)	good effect, advantage
benefit (verb)	help, be useful to
benign	isn't harmful, not cancer
bilateral	on both sides
biopsy	sample of tissue from part of the body
blood glucose	blood sugar
blood profile	series of blood tests
BMI, body mass index	using your height and weight to measure if you're overweight
bradycardia	slow heart beat
buttocks	butt, backside, rear, rear end
calculate	add up, figure out
capable, capability	able, ability
carcinogen	something that can cause cancer
carcinoma	cancer
cardiac	(of/in/related to) the heart
cardiologist	heart doctor
cardiovascular	heart and/or blood vessel
carpal	wrist
category	kind, class, group
catheter	a tube for (putting fluids into/ taking fluids out of) the body
catheterize	put a tube into (part of the body)
caveat	warning; detail to think about
cease	stop
cell culture	tissue sample or a study of the tissue
cellulitis	skin infection
Central Nervous System (CNS)	brain and spinal cord

cerebral hemorrhage (or cerebral accident or cerebrovascular accident or CVA)	stroke, blood clot in the brain
cessation	ending, stop, pause
chemotherapy	drugs to treat cancer
chest film	chest X-ray
cholesterol, HDL cholesterol, LDL cholesterol	types of fat found in the blood, HDL is good cholesterol, LDL is bad
chronic	lasting a long time, life-long
clavicle	collarbone
clinical	(related to) medical care
clinical trial	a research study that tests new treatments on patients
coagulate	clot, stop flowing
cognitive	learning, thinking
cognizant	aware (of)
coitus	sex
collaborate with	work with
colon/colorectal	large intestine
colonoscopy	an exam of the inside of the large intestine that uses a flexible tube with a lens at the end
commence	begin, start
commitment	promise
commonly	most often
communicate	write, tell, talk, let you know
compensate, compensation	pay, give money
complete	finish, do, fill out, take part in
comply with	follow
component	part, section, phase
comprise	form, include, make up
computed tomography	CT scan or imaging test, 3-D X-ray
conceal(ed)	hide (hidden)
concerning	about, on
condition	how you feel, health problem
conduct(ing)	do(ing)
congenital	present at birth, born with
congenital anomaly	birth defect
congestive heart failure	when the heart isn't pumping hard enough
conjunctivitis	pink eye
consequence	result
consequently	so, because of this, as a result

consider	think about
consolidate	combine, join, put together
contains	has
constitutes	is, forms, makes up
construct	make, build, design
contingent upon	if
continue	go on, keep (on)
contraceptive	birth control
contract(ing) [a disease]	get(ing) [a disease]
contraindicated	not recommended, can cause a bad reaction, not allowed
contrast medium	dye
contribute	give, help
controlled trial	a study that compares one treatment to another treatment
contusion	bruise
convene	meet
convenient	handy, works well
conversion	change
convulsion	seizure, shaking
coronary	(in/of/related to) the blood vessels that bring blood to the heart
coronary thrombosis	heart attack
correlation	link
correspond	similar to, be in agreement with
crucial	very important
currently	now
cutaneous	(in/of/about/related to) the skin
debilitating	weakening
decision	choice
decrease	lower, reduce
deem	think, believe, consider
deep vein thrombosis	a blood clot deep in the vein
deficiency	not enough
deficit	shortage
degeneration	getting or gets worse
delete	remove, take out, cut, drop
demonstrate	prove, show
depart	leave
describing	tell about
designate	choose, name, select, appoint
detect	find (out)
determine	decide, find (out), learn (if)

detrimental	harmful, bad
develop	occur, start to get, happen
diabetic	person who has diabetes
diagnose, diagnosis	(find the) problem or condition
diagnostic procedure	a test to look for a problem
diaphoresis	sweating
difficulties	problems, trouble
diffuse	widespread, scattered
digit	finger or toe
dilute	add liquid, make less strong
diminish(ed)	go down, decrease, less (of), lower
disclose	share, tell, show
discoloration	change in color
disconnect	unhook, separate, divide
discontinue	drop, stop
discover	find (out), learn if
discrepancy	conflict, difference, error, split
disseminate(d)	give, share, send, pass on, (spread out)
diuretic	drug that makes you urinate (OR pee) more
diverticulitis	when your large intestine is swollen or infected
donate	give
double blind	a study where the researchers and the participants don't know what drug the participant is getting
dressing	bandage
due to the fact	because
dysfunction	not working
dysmenorrhea	painful period cramps
dyspepsia	heartburn
dysphagia	trouble swallowing
dyspnea	trouble breathing
echocardiography, echocardiogram	pictures of the heart
edema	swelling
efficacy	how well (a treatment) works
elect	choose, pick
electrolytes	salts in the blood that control the balance of fluids in the body
elevate	high, higher, raise
eliminate	get rid of, remove, cut, end, go to the bathroom
elucidate	explain
embolism	lump of blood, clot

embolism/embolus	clot that blocks a blood vessel or artery
emesis	throwing up, vomiting
empirical evidence	proof
employ	use
employment	work
enable	allow, let
encounter	meet, meeting
encourage	urge
endeavor	try
endometrium	lining of the uterus
enlarge	get bigger
enroll	be in, join
ensue	follow(ing), occur after, happen next
ensure	make sure
enumerate	count
enuresis	problems controlling urine, bladder control problems
epidemiologist	scientist who studies diseases
episode	bout or attack
equilibrium	balance
equivalent	equal, the same as
equitable	fair
eradicate	get rid of
eruption (skin)	rash or breakout
especially	mainly, mostly
establish	set up; also, show, prove
etiology	cause
evaluate	look at, study, measure, rate
evidence of	proof of, signs of
evident	clear
exacerbate	make worse
examination	exam
examine	look at, study
excise	remove by cutting, cut out
exhale	breathe out
exhibit	show
expedite, expeditious	speed up, make (something) go faster, make (something) easier, (fast, quick)
expend	spend
experiencing	feeling, going through, having
expire, expiration	end (date), run out

explicit	plain, clear
extensive	A lot (of), wide-spread, throughout the body
external	outside (the body)
exude	ooze
facilitate	help, ease, make (something) easier
failed to	did not
feasible	can be done, possible, workable
febrile	fever
femur	thigh bone, bone that connects the hip and knee
fetus	unborn baby
finalize	complete, finish
forfeit	give up, lose
formulate	work out, form, make
forward	send
fracture(d)	break, (broken)
frequently	often, a lot
fructose	fruit sugar
function	act, role, work
fundamental	basic
furnish	give, send
gastric	(of/in/related to) the stomach
gastroenterologist	doctor who treats problems with digestion
gastroesophageal reflux (GERD=gastroesophageal reflux disease)	heartburn
generalized	wide-spread
gerontological	age-related, (related to) aging
gestation	pregnancy
GI specialist	doctor who treats problems with digestion
glucose	sugar
gradually	slowly, over time
gynecologist	doctor trained in women's health
hazardous	dangerous, not safe
hearing impairment	hearing loss or deafness
heart failure	heart isn't pumping hard enough
hematocrit	amount of red blood cells in the blood
hematoma	bruise
hemorrhage	heavy bleeding
hence	so
hepatic	(of/in/related to) the liver

heritable, hereditary	genetic, traits that are passed down in families
herpes simplex type 1	cold sore
herpes simplex type 2	herpes
herpes zoster	shingles
heterogeneous	different, mixed
hirsutism	unwanted hair growth
homogeneous	same or similar
however	but
hyperopia	farsighted(ness)
hypersensitivity	very sensitive to
hypertension (hypotension)	blood pressure that's too high (blood pressure that's too low)
hyperthyroidism (hypothyroidism)	overactive thyroid, too much thyroid hormone (underactive thyroid, not enough thyroid hormone)
hypothesis	idea being tested
hypoxia	not enough oxygen in the blood
identical	same, exactly alike
identified	found
identify	find (out), pinpoint, name, show
idiopathic	we don't know what causes it
immediately	right away, now, at once
immerse	cover in, dip in
immunotherapy	treatment to make the immune system work better (boost immune system)
impact	change, affect
impede	slow, make it harder to
implant	put into the body
implement	carry out, put in place, start
impotent, impotence	when a man either can't get or can't keep an erection
in addition	also, too, and
in lieu of	instead (of)
in the event of	if
in vitro	in a test tube or lab
incapacitate	make it hard or impossible to do
inception	start, beginning
incidence	number of new cases, how many times it occurs
incision	cut, slit
including	along with, like, such as
incorrect	wrong, not right
increase, increased	raise, higher
indicate	mean, show, suggest, tell us, fill in, write down

indication	sign, symptom
ineffectual	doesn't work, useless, of no use
infectious (disease)	passed from one person to the next
infection	illness, sickness, disease
infertile	not able to get pregnant
inflammation	swelling, painful swelling
influence	affect
inform	tell
informed consent	deciding to get a certain treatment or be in a research study after thinking about the pros and cons (risks and benefits)
infusion	putting a substance into the body through the blood
ingest	eat or drink
inhale	breathe in
inhibit	stop
inhibitor	drug that slows down or stops something from happening
initial	first
initiate	begin, start
injection	shot
innovation	new idea, new way
inquire	ask
institute	start, set up
instrument	tool
insufficient	not enough, too little
intake	what you eat or drink; what goes into your body
intent, intention	aim, goal, purpose
interface	meet, work with
intermittent	off and on
internal	inside (the body)
interior	inside
internist	doctor of internal medicine
interrupt	stop
intervention	treatment
intramuscular	in a muscle
intravenous	in a vein
intubate	put a tube down your throat into your airway so you can breathe
invasive disease	disease that (can or has) spread to other parts of the body
invasive procedure	to go into the body through a cut, slit, or puncture
investigation	study
investigator(s)	researcher(s), people doing the study
issue	give

jaundice	when the whites of the eyes and the skin look yellow
juvenile (condition)	childhood (condition)
laceration	cut, tear, slit
lactation	breastfeeding
lactose	sugar found in milk
larynx	voice box
lateral	side, on the side
lethargic	sluggish; very sleepy
limb	arm or leg
lingual	tongue
lipids	fats in the blood
lipid profile (or lipid panel)	lab test to measure the amount of fats in the blood
locality	place
locally, localized	in one area
locate	find
location	place
lymphoma	cancer of the lymph nodes (or tissues)
magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)	pictures of the inside of the body taken with a special machine, like an x-ray but more detailed
magnitude	size
maintain	keep, support
malaise	general feeling of being sick, feeling bad
malignant, malignancy	harmful, poisonous; cancer that may spread to other parts of the body
malingering	pretending to be sick
majority (of)	most
manifestation	sign
manner	way
materialize	appear
maximum	greatest, largest, most
mean (statistical)	average (statistical)
medication	drug, medicine
menarche	first (menstrual) period
menopause	when a woman doesn't get any more (menstrual) periods
menses, menstruation	(menstrual) period
metabolism, metabolize	how the body breaks down food into energy
metastasize	spread
metastatic	cancer that has spread
miliaria	prickly heat
minimal (minimum)	least, smallest, slight (at least)
minimize	decrease, lower, reduce

mobile (mobility)	able (ability) to move around
moderate (verb)	limit, control
modify, modification	change
monitor	check (on), keep track (of), watch
morbidity	disease rate, illness rate
mortality	death rate, death, dying
motility	movement, ability to move
musculoskeletal	muscles and bones
mutation	genetic defect
myocardial infarction (MI)	heart attack
myopia	nearsighted(ness), when it's hard to see things that are far away
nausea (nauseous)	upset stomach, feeling like throwing up, feel like vomiting
nebulous	vague, not clear
necessary	needed, need to
negligible	small
nephropathy	kidney disease
neuralgia	nerve pain
neuron	nerve cell
nodule	lump
noncompliant	not following a treatment plan
noninvasive	without using surgery, needles, or cutting the skin
notification, notify	to tell, let know
numerate	count
numerous	many
nutrient	food
objective	aim, goal
obligate, obligation	require, bind, means that (you) have to, duty
observe	see
obstruct	block or close
obtain	get, take
occasionally	sometimes
occlude (occlusion)	block (blockage)
occupation(al)	job, work
oncologist	doctor who treats cancer
oncology	study or treatment of cancer
onset	start
opportunity	chance
optimum, optimal	best, greatest, most
option	choice, way
oral (oral administration)	(given) by mouth

orthopedic	(of/about/related to) the bones
osteoporosis	brittle bone disease, having bones that can break easily
otherwise	if not
otolaryngologist	ear, nose, and throat doctor
outcomes	results, (long-term) changes
palliative	make feel better but not cure, ease symptoms
pallor	paleness
palpate	feel
palpitation	fast heartbeat
parameter	limit, boundary
paresthesia	tingling, prickling, or burning feeling on the skin that can't be explained or doesn't seem to have any cause
participant	person who takes part
participate (ing, ion)	be, do, join, opt in, take part (ing)
parturition	labor and delivery, childbirth
pathogen(esis)	cause of a disease
perforation	hole
perform	do
periodically	from time to time
perioral	around the mouth
peripheral	on the edge, not central
permit(ted)	allow(ed), let
persist	last, keep going, doesn't stop
persistent	lasting
personnel	staff, people
pertaining to	about, of, on
peruse	read, study, examine with care
pervasive	widespread
pharmaceutical,	drug
pharmacotherapy	use drugs to treat a disease or condition
pharyngitis	sore throat
physician	doctor
physiological	having to do with the body
pigmentation	color
placebo	a pill that doesn't have any drugs or medicine; a "sugar" pill
placenta	part of the mother's womb that supplies oxygen and nutrition to her unborn baby
plaque (artery)	fatty deposit
plasma	the fluid part of blood
plasma glucose	blood sugar

portion	part
positron emission tomography	PET scan or imaging test; test done to look at organs in the body
possess	have, own
posterior	back
postoperative (post-op)	after surgery
preadolescent	preteen
preclinical	isn't causing symptoms yet, no signs yet
preclude	prevent; rule out
predisposed, predisposition	likely to, inclined to
prenatal	before birth
presently	right now
present with	have
preserve	keep
prevalence, prevalent	how often it happens, common, happens often
prevent	stop, put a stop to, to keep from happening
previous, previously	before, earlier
principal investigator	head researcher, scientist in charge of a study
prior (to)	earlier, before
prioritize	rank, order, put in order of importance
proactive	taking action on your own
procedure	something that is done, a process
proceed	do, go ahead, start, try
procure, procurement	buy, get
proficiency, proficient	skill, skilled
prognosis	outlook
progress (verb), progressive	worsen, get(s) worse
prohibit, prohibitive, prohibited from	prevent, restrict(ive), strict, may not, don't allow
promulgate	make, issue, publish
prone	lying face down, lying on your stomach
prophylaxis	something that prevents disease or infection
prosthesis	replacement for a body part, such as a man-made arm
protocol	plan of study, rule, process
provide	give (us), offer, say
provided that	if
provider	doctor, clinician, person who gives health care
proximal	close, closer to the center of the body
psychopathology	mental illness
psychosocial	mental and social

psychotropic	mind-altering
pulmonary	(in/or/about/related to) the lungs
pulmonary embolism	blood clot in the lung
purchase	buy
pursuant to	by, following, under
questionnaire	survey, series of questions
radiologist	doctor who specializes in reading X-rays
radiology	X-ray department
ramifications	outcomes, problems, results
randomized/randomization	assigned to a group by chance, like flipping a coin [if there are 2 groups]...like drawing names out of a hat [if there are more than 2 groups]
random(ly)	by chance
random sample	group of (people) chosen by chance; like drawing names out of a hat
range	area, between (x) and (y), from low(est) to high(est)
receive	get
recur	return, come back, happen again
referral	send to see another doctor
reflect	say, show
reflux	heartburn
refractory	hard to treat, hard to manage
regarding	about, of, on
regardless	no matter
regimen	treatment plan
regulate	affect, control
regulations	rules
relapse	slip, backslide, return of a disease
relevant (to)	about, tied in with, related to
relocate	move
remain	stay, wait
remainder	rest, what is left over
remaining	other, (second, last, final), left, left over
remission	cancer that has gone away
renal	(in/of/about/related to) the kidneys
render	make, give
replicable	can be done again
represents	is
request	ask
require(d), requirement	must do or have, need(ed)
researchers	people doing the study

resect	cut out, take out through surgery, remove
reside, residence	live, house, home
respiration	breathing
restrictions	limits
retain	keep
retinol	vitamin A
retrospective study	a study looking at things that have already happened
revise(d), revision	change(d), new
reveal	give us, show, tell
routinely	often, commonly
rupture	break open, burst
sarcoma	type of cancer
satisfactory	okay, fine, good
sclerosis	when certain tissues of the body get hard and thick
sedative	a drug to make you feel calm or less anxious
sedentary	inactive, not active
seldom	rarely, not very often
selection	choice
sensation	feeling
sepsis	a very serious infection
sequentially	in a row, in order, by number
several	a few, a number of, some
severe	serious, bad
severity	how bad
shall	will
similar (to)	like, alike
similarity	likeness
sinusitis	sinus infection
solely	only
solicit	ask for, request
somnolence	sleepiness
specify	name
specimen	sample
spirometer	a device that measures how much air you're breathing in and out
state-of-the-art	latest
stenosis	getting more narrow
stimulate	excite, trigger
strategy, strategize	(make a) plan
streptococcal	strep
subcutaneous	under the skin

sublingual	medication taken by dissolving under the tongue, under the tongue
submit	give, send
subsequent(ly)	after, later, next, then
substantial	big, large, much
sucrose	sugar
sufficient	enough, plenty
suggest(s)	show(s) there might be
supine	lying on your back
sustain	keep going
sustenance	support, food
sutures	stitches
symptomatic	having symptoms
systemic	whole body
tachycardia	very fast heart beat
tap	use a needle to take out fluid
tear a ligament (torn ligament)	sprain
telephone	phone
terminal	not curable, causes death, going to die
terminate, termination	put an end to, stop, end
therapeutic modality	treatment
therapy	treatment
therefore	so, as a result
thoracic	chest
thrombosis	blood clots in the blood vessels
topical (application)	surface, on the skin, (put on, put on the skin)
torso	trunk, main part of your body not including head, arms, or legs
toxic, toxin	poisonous, poison
toxicity	bad side effects
trachea	windpipe
transdermal	through the skin
transmit(ted), transmission	send (sent), spread to, pass on
transpire	happen
trauma	injury, wound
tremor	shaking
ultimate	final
uncommon	rare
undergo	have
understand	learn, see
unequivocal	clear

unnecessary	not needed
urinalysis	urine test
utilize, utilization	use
validate	approve, confirm
variable	factor, changes over time
varicella	chickenpox
variety	many different kinds
vector	an insect or other animal that carries disease
vertigo	dizziness
viable	practical, workable, possible
visualize	picture, see, imagine
vitals, vital signs	heart rate, blood pressure, breathing rate, and temperature
warrant	call for, permit
whereas	because, since
withdraw (from)	drop, leave, take back, take out