

common medical terms definition

Medical jargon can be intimidating, often creating a barrier between patients and their healthcare providers. Understanding common medical terms definition is crucial for informed decision-making and effective communication in healthcare. This comprehensive guide aims to demystify these essential terms, providing clear and concise explanations for a wide range of medical concepts. Whether you're a patient navigating a diagnosis, a student embarking on a healthcare career, or simply seeking to enhance your health literacy, this article will serve as your trusted resource for understanding the language of medicine. We'll explore key terminology across various specialties, from general health and wellness to more specialized areas like cardiology and oncology, ensuring you gain a solid foundation in the most frequently encountered medical terms.

- Introduction to Common Medical Terms
- Understanding Medical Terminology Basics
- Key Medical Terms in General Health and Wellness
- Cardiovascular Medical Terms Explained
- Respiratory System Medical Terms
- Gastrointestinal Medical Terms
- Neurological Medical Terms
- Oncology Medical Terms
- Endocrine System Medical Terms
- Dermatological Medical Terms
- Musculoskeletal Medical Terms
- Common Diagnostic and Procedural Terms
- Medical Abbreviations and Acronyms
- Conclusion: Empowering Yourself with Medical Terminology

Introduction to Common Medical Terms Definition

Navigating the world of healthcare often feels like learning a new language, filled with specialized vocabulary and intricate concepts. For patients, understanding common medical terms definition is not just about satisfying curiosity; it's about actively participating in their own care, asking informed

questions, and comprehending treatment plans. This article is designed to be your comprehensive lexicon, breaking down the essential medical terms that you are likely to encounter in doctor's offices, hospitals, and health-related literature. We will delve into the core components of medical language, explore frequently used terms across various medical specialties, and highlight the importance of clear communication in achieving better health outcomes. By demystifying these terms, we aim to empower individuals with the knowledge they need to feel more confident and in control of their health journey.

Understanding Medical Terminology Basics

At its root, medical terminology is largely derived from Greek and Latin. Understanding these foundational elements can unlock the meaning of many complex words. Most medical terms are built from three components: a prefix (which comes before the root word and modifies its meaning), a root word (which carries the main meaning), and a suffix (which comes after the root word and further specifies its meaning). For instance, in the term "cardiomyopathy," "cardio-" is the prefix relating to the heart, "-myo-" is the root meaning muscle, and "-pathy" is the suffix indicating disease. Recognizing these building blocks significantly aids in deciphering unfamiliar medical terms definition.

Prefixes in Medical Terms

Prefixes are crucial for understanding the location, number, time, or state of a condition. For example, "hyper-" means above or excessive, as in hypertension (high blood pressure), while "hypo-" means below or deficient, as in hypoglycemia (low blood sugar). Other common prefixes include "anti-" (against), "brady-" (slow), "tachy-" (fast), "endo-" (within), and "exo-" (outside). Mastering these initial parts of medical terms can provide immediate context.

Roots of Medical Terms

The root word is the core of a medical term, usually indicating a body part, organ, or condition. For example, "nephro-" relates to the kidney (as in nephrology), "hepat-" relates to the liver (as in hepatitis), and "oste-" relates to bone (as in osteomyelitis). Understanding these central roots is key to grasping the overall meaning of a medical term definition.

Suffixes in Medical Terms

Suffixes typically describe a procedure, condition, symptom, or disease. "-itis" signifies inflammation, as in appendicitis. "-oma" indicates a tumor, such as lipoma. "-ectomy" denotes surgical removal, like appendectomy. Other common suffixes include "-ology" (the study of), "-scopy" (visual examination), and "-osis" (abnormal condition).

Key Medical Terms in General Health and Wellness

When discussing overall health, several fundamental medical terms definition are frequently used. These terms help describe a person's state of being, common symptoms, and general health practices. Understanding these basics is the first step towards a healthier lifestyle.

Vital Signs

Vital signs are fundamental indicators of a person's health. They provide essential information about bodily functions. These include:

- **Temperature:** The degree of heat in the body, typically measured in Fahrenheit or Celsius.
- **Pulse Rate:** The number of times the heart beats per minute.
- **Respirations:** The number of breaths taken per minute.
- **Blood Pressure:** The force of blood pushing against the walls of arteries, measured in millimeters of mercury (mmHg).
- **Oxygen Saturation:** The percentage of oxygen carried in the blood.

Common Symptoms

Symptoms are subjective evidence of disease or physical disturbance. They are what the patient feels and reports.

- **Fever:** An abnormally high body temperature.
- **Pain:** An unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage.
- **Nausea:** A feeling of sickness with an inclination to vomit.
- **Dizziness:** A sensation of spinning or unsteadiness.
- **Fatigue:** Extreme tiredness or lack of energy.

Health and Wellness Practices

These terms relate to maintaining good health.

- **Prognosis:** The likely course of a disease or ailment and the chances of recovery.

- **Diagnosis:** The identification of the nature of an illness or other problem by examination of the symptoms.
- **Treatment:** Medical care given to a patient for an illness or injury.
- **Prevention:** Actions taken to avoid illness or disease.
- **Wellness:** The state of being in good health, especially as an actively pursued goal.

Cardiovascular Medical Terms Explained

The cardiovascular system, responsible for circulating blood throughout the body, has its own distinct set of medical terms definition. Understanding these terms is vital for comprehending heart health and related conditions.

Heart and Blood Vessel Terms

These terms relate to the anatomy and function of the heart and circulatory system.

- **Heart:** The muscular organ that pumps blood through the circulatory system.
- **Artery:** A blood vessel that carries oxygenated blood away from the heart to the rest of the body.
- **Vein:** A blood vessel that carries deoxygenated blood from the body back to the heart.
- **Capillary:** The smallest blood vessels, connecting arteries and veins, where oxygen and nutrient exchange occurs.
- **Aorta:** The largest artery in the body, originating from the left ventricle of the heart and extending down to the abdomen.

Common Cardiovascular Conditions

These are frequently encountered conditions affecting the heart and blood vessels.

- **Hypertension:** High blood pressure.
- **Hypotension:** Low blood pressure.
- **Myocardial Infarction (Heart Attack):** The death of heart muscle tissue due to lack of blood supply.

- **Arrhythmia:** An irregular heartbeat.
- **Atherosclerosis:** The buildup of plaque in the arteries, narrowing them and restricting blood flow.

Diagnostic Tests and Procedures

These terms refer to methods used to evaluate cardiovascular health.

- **Electrocardiogram (ECG or EKG):** A test that records the electrical activity of the heart.
- **Echocardiogram:** An ultrasound of the heart used to assess its structure and function.
- **Angiogram:** An X-ray of blood vessels after injecting a contrast dye.
- **Stent:** A small mesh tube used to prop open a narrowed or blocked artery.
- **Bypass Surgery:** A surgical procedure to improve blood flow to the heart by creating new routes around blocked coronary arteries.

Respiratory System Medical Terms

The respiratory system is responsible for gas exchange, bringing oxygen into the body and removing carbon dioxide. Understanding its terminology is key to discussing breathing-related issues.

Lungs and Airways

These terms describe the anatomy of the respiratory system.

- **Lungs:** The primary organs of respiration.
- **Trachea (Windpipe):** The tube that connects the larynx to the bronchi of the lungs.
- **Bronchi:** The main airways that carry air to the lungs.
- **Alveoli:** Tiny air sacs in the lungs where oxygen and carbon dioxide exchange takes place.
- **Diaphragm:** A large, dome-shaped muscle at the base of the chest cavity that helps with breathing.

Respiratory Conditions

These are common ailments affecting the respiratory system.

- **Pneumonia:** An infection that inflames the air sacs in one or both lungs.
- **Asthma:** A chronic inflammatory disease of the airways that causes them to become narrow and swollen, producing extra mucus.
- **Bronchitis:** Inflammation of the lining of the bronchial tubes.
- **Emphysema:** A lung condition that causes shortness of breath. It is a form of COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease).
- **Pulmonary Edema:** An abnormal accumulation of fluid in the lungs.

Respiratory Diagnostics

These are common tests for respiratory health.

- **Spirometry:** A lung function test that measures how much air you can inhale and exhale, and how quickly you can exhale.
- **Bronchoscopy:** A procedure to examine the airways using a thin, flexible tube with a camera.
- **Chest X-ray:** An imaging test that uses X-rays to create pictures of the structures inside the chest.
- **Pulse Oximetry:** A non-invasive method to measure oxygen saturation levels in the blood.

Gastrointestinal Medical Terms

The gastrointestinal (GI) system is responsible for digesting food, absorbing nutrients, and eliminating waste. Understanding GI medical terms definition is essential for discussing digestive health.

Digestive Tract Anatomy

These terms refer to the organs of the digestive system.

- **Esophagus:** The tube that connects the throat to the stomach.
- **Stomach:** A J-shaped organ where food is digested.

- **Small Intestine:** The primary site for nutrient absorption.
- **Large Intestine:** Absorbs water from indigestible food matter and transmits useless waste material from the body.
- **Liver:** An organ that produces bile, which aids in digestion.
- **Gallbladder:** Stores bile produced by the liver.

Common GI Conditions

These are prevalent digestive health issues.

- **Gastritis:** Inflammation of the stomach lining.
- **Peptic Ulcer:** An open sore in the lining of the stomach or duodenum.
- **Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD):** A chronic condition where stomach acid flows back into the esophagus.
- **Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS):** A common disorder that affects the large intestine.
- **Hepatitis:** Inflammation of the liver, often caused by a viral infection.

GI Diagnostic and Treatment Terms

These relate to evaluating and managing digestive disorders.

- **Endoscopy:** A procedure using a flexible tube with a camera to view the GI tract.
- **Colonoscopy:** An endoscopic examination of the colon.
- **Biopsy:** The removal of a small sample of tissue for examination.
- **Laparoscopy:** A minimally invasive surgical technique.
- **Dietary Modifications:** Changes to eating habits to manage digestive issues.

Neurological Medical Terms

The neurological system encompasses the brain, spinal cord, and nerves. Understanding neurological medical terms definition is crucial for discussing conditions affecting these vital

components.

Brain and Nervous System Anatomy

These terms describe the parts of the nervous system.

- **Brain:** The control center of the nervous system.
- **Spinal Cord:** A column of nerve tissue extending from the brainstem to the lower back.
- **Neuron:** A specialized cell transmitting nerve impulses.
- **Cerebrum:** The largest part of the brain, responsible for higher functions like thought and memory.
- **Cerebellum:** Located at the back of the brain, it coordinates voluntary movements such as posture, balance, coordination, and speech.

Neurological Conditions

These are common disorders affecting the nervous system.

- **Stroke:** Damage to the brain from interruption of its blood supply.
- **Epilepsy:** A neurological disorder characterized by recurrent seizures.
- **Alzheimer's Disease:** A progressive neurodegenerative disease that affects memory and cognitive functions.
- **Parkinson's Disease:** A progressive disorder of the nervous system that affects movement.
- **Migraine:** A severe headache, often accompanied by nausea, vomiting, and sensitivity to light and sound.

Neurological Diagnostics and Treatments

These refer to methods of evaluating and managing neurological issues.

- **MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging):** A medical imaging technique used to visualize internal structures of the body.
- **CT Scan (Computed Tomography Scan):** An imaging procedure that uses X-rays to create detailed cross-sectional images of the body.

- **EEG (Electroencephalogram):** A test that records the electrical activity of the brain.
- **Lumbar Puncture (Spinal Tap):** A procedure to collect cerebrospinal fluid for analysis.
- **Physical Therapy:** Rehabilitation that aims to improve motor function.

Oncology Medical Terms

Oncology is the branch of medicine that deals with the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of cancer. Understanding oncology medical terms definition is vital for patients and their families.

Cancer-Related Terminology

These terms are specific to the study of cancer.

- **Cancer:** A disease characterized by the uncontrolled growth and spread of abnormal cells.
- **Tumor:** An abnormal mass of tissue, which may be benign or malignant.
- **Malignant:** Cancerous; capable of invading surrounding tissues and spreading to distant parts of the body.
- **Benign:** Non-cancerous; does not invade surrounding tissues or spread to distant parts of the body.
- **Metastasis:** The spread of cancer cells from the primary site to other parts of the body.

Types of Cancer Treatment

These are common methods used to treat cancer.

- **Chemotherapy:** The use of drugs to treat cancer.
- **Radiation Therapy:** The use of high-energy rays to kill cancer cells.
- **Surgery:** The removal of cancerous tumors or affected tissue.
- **Immunotherapy:** A type of cancer treatment that harnesses the body's own immune system to fight cancer.
- **Targeted Therapy:** A type of drug therapy that blocks the growth of cancer cells by interfering with specific molecules that are involved in cancer growth.

Oncology Diagnostic Tools

These are common methods for diagnosing cancer.

- **Biopsy:** Surgical removal of tissue for examination.
- **Imaging Scans (e.g., PET Scan, Bone Scan):** Techniques to detect or monitor cancer.
- **Blood Tests (e.g., Tumor Markers):** Substances in the blood that may indicate the presence of cancer.
- **Pathology Report:** A document detailing the findings from the examination of tissue samples.

Endocrine System Medical Terms

The endocrine system regulates various bodily functions through hormones. Familiarity with endocrine medical terms definition helps in understanding hormonal imbalances and related conditions.

Hormones and Glands

These terms relate to the components of the endocrine system.

- **Hormone:** A chemical messenger produced by glands that travels through the bloodstream to target cells and organs.
- **Gland:** An organ that produces and secretes hormones.
- **Pituitary Gland:** Often called the "master gland," it controls many other endocrine glands.
- **Thyroid Gland:** Produces hormones that regulate metabolism.
- **Adrenal Glands:** Produce hormones like adrenaline and cortisol.
- **Pancreas:** Produces insulin and glucagon, regulating blood sugar.

Endocrine Disorders

These are common conditions related to the endocrine system.

- **Diabetes Mellitus:** A metabolic disorder characterized by high blood sugar levels.
- **Hypothyroidism:** A condition where the thyroid gland doesn't produce enough thyroid

hormone.

- **Hyperthyroidism:** A condition where the thyroid gland produces too much thyroid hormone.
- **Cushing's Syndrome:** A disorder caused by prolonged exposure to high levels of cortisol.
- **Growth Hormone Deficiency:** Insufficient production of growth hormone, affecting growth and development.

Endocrine Diagnostics

These are methods used to diagnose endocrine conditions.

- **Blood Glucose Test:** Measures the amount of sugar in the blood.
- **Hormone Level Testing:** Measures the concentration of specific hormones in the blood or urine.
- **Thyroid Function Tests (TFTs):** Assesses the function of the thyroid gland.
- **Imaging Scans (e.g., Ultrasound of the Thyroid):** Visualizes endocrine organs.

Dermatological Medical Terms

Dermatology focuses on the skin, hair, and nails. Understanding dermatological medical terms definition is useful for managing skin health and conditions.

Skin Anatomy and Conditions

These terms describe the skin and its common ailments.

- **Epidermis:** The outer layer of the skin.
- **Dermis:** The inner layer of the skin, containing blood vessels, nerves, and hair follicles.
- **Acne:** A skin condition characterized by pimples and blackheads.
- **Eczema:** A chronic inflammatory skin condition causing itchy, dry, and inflamed patches.
- **Psoriasis:** A skin disease that causes a rapid buildup of skin cells, forming thick, silvery scales and itchy, dry, red patches.
- **Melanoma:** A dangerous form of skin cancer.

Dermatological Treatments

These are common ways to treat skin issues.

- **Topical Medications:** Creams, ointments, or lotions applied to the skin.
- **Biopsy:** Removal of a skin sample for diagnosis.
- **Cryotherapy:** Treatment using extreme cold to destroy abnormal tissue.
- **Phototherapy:** Treatment using ultraviolet light.
- **Laser Therapy:** Using focused light beams to treat skin conditions.

Musculoskeletal Medical Terms

The musculoskeletal system includes bones, muscles, ligaments, tendons, and joints. Knowledge of musculoskeletal medical terms definition is helpful for understanding injuries and conditions affecting mobility.

Skeletal and Muscular Anatomy

These terms refer to the components of the musculoskeletal system.

- **Bone:** The hard, calcified tissue that forms the skeleton.
- **Muscle:** Tissues that can contract and produce movement.
- **Joint:** The point at which two or more bones meet.
- **Ligament:** Connective tissue that connects bone to bone.
- **Tendon:** Connective tissue that connects muscle to bone.
- **Cartilage:** A flexible connective tissue found in many areas of the body, including joints.

Musculoskeletal Conditions

These are common issues affecting the musculoskeletal system.

- **Arthritis:** Inflammation of one or more joints, causing pain and stiffness.

- **Osteoporosis:** A condition where bones become weak and brittle.
- **Fracture:** A break in a bone.
- **Sprain:** An injury to a ligament caused by overstretching or tearing.
- **Strain:** An injury to a muscle or tendon caused by overstretching or tearing.
- **Bursitis:** Inflammation of a bursa, a small fluid-filled sac that reduces friction between bones, tendons, and muscles.

Musculoskeletal Diagnostics and Therapies

These are common methods for evaluating and treating musculoskeletal problems.

- **X-ray:** Imaging that uses radiation to visualize bones.
- **Arthroscopy:** A minimally invasive surgical procedure for examining and repairing damage to joints.
- **Physical Therapy:** Rehabilitation to improve strength, flexibility, and range of motion.
- **Orthotics:** Devices used to support or correct the function of a body part, such as braces or insoles.
- **Anti-inflammatory Medications:** Drugs used to reduce inflammation and pain.

Common Diagnostic and Procedural Terms

Beyond specific body systems, numerous general diagnostic and procedural terms are encountered in healthcare settings. Understanding these common medical terms definition is essential for comprehending the diagnostic process and the interventions being performed.

Diagnostic Tools and Techniques

These are widely used methods for identifying illnesses.

- **Ultrasound:** Uses sound waves to create images of internal body structures.
- **Laboratory Tests:** Analysis of blood, urine, or tissue samples to detect diseases or monitor health.
- **Biopsy:** The removal of a small piece of tissue for examination under a microscope.

- **Culture:** A test to identify the presence of microorganisms, such as bacteria or fungi, in a sample.
- **Allergy Testing:** Procedures to identify specific allergens that cause an allergic reaction.

Medical Procedures and Interventions

These terms describe actions taken by healthcare professionals.

- **Intravenous (IV):** Administration of fluids or medications directly into a vein.
- **Catheterization:** The insertion of a tube (catheter) into a body cavity or vessel, often to drain fluids or administer medication.
- **Laparotomy:** A surgical incision into the abdomen.
- **Transfusion:** The process of transferring blood or blood components from one person to another.
- **Rehabilitation:** Therapy aimed at restoring function and improving quality of life after an illness or injury.

Monitoring and Assessment Terms

These describe how a patient's progress is tracked.

- **Monitoring:** Continuous observation of a patient's condition.
- **Assessment:** The evaluation of a patient's health status.
- **Follow-up:** Subsequent medical care after an initial visit or treatment.
- **Re-evaluation:** A second assessment of a patient's condition.

Medical Abbreviations and Acronyms

Healthcare professionals often use abbreviations and acronyms to communicate efficiently. However, these can be confusing for patients. Understanding common medical terms definition includes recognizing some of these shorthand notations.

Commonly Used Abbreviations

These are frequently encountered abbreviations in medical contexts.

- **BP:** Blood Pressure
- **HR:** Heart Rate
- **RR:** Respiratory Rate
- **SOB:** Shortness of Breath
- **Dx:** Diagnosis
- **Rx:** Prescription or Treatment
- **STAT:** Immediately
- **NPO:** Nothing By Mouth (Nil Per Os)

Understanding the Context

It is crucial to remember that the meaning of an abbreviation can sometimes vary depending on the context. Always clarify with your healthcare provider if you are unsure about the meaning of any abbreviation or acronym. Patient safety relies on clear and accurate communication, and asking questions is always encouraged.

Conclusion: Empowering Yourself with Medical Terminology

Understanding common medical terms definition is a cornerstone of effective healthcare engagement. This comprehensive guide has provided a foundational understanding of terminology across various medical disciplines, from general health indicators to specialized fields like oncology and neurology. By familiarizing yourself with these terms, you are better equipped to communicate with your healthcare providers, ask pertinent questions, and actively participate in decisions regarding your health and well-being. Remember, knowledge is power, and a strong grasp of medical language can significantly improve your healthcare experience and lead to better health outcomes. Continue to seek clarity and ask for explanations whenever needed, as informed patients are empowered patients.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the difference between an epidemic and a pandemic?

An epidemic is a sudden increase in the number of cases of a disease above what is normally expected in that population in that area. A pandemic is an epidemic that has spread over several countries or continents, affecting a large number of people.

Can you explain what 'idiopathic' means in a medical context?

Idiopathic refers to a disease or condition that arises spontaneously, for which there is no known cause.

What is the significance of 'comorbidity' in healthcare?

Comorbidity refers to the presence of one or more additional conditions, often co-existing with a primary condition. It's significant because it can complicate diagnosis, treatment, and prognosis.

What is meant by 'prognosis'?

Prognosis is a medical term that refers to the likely course or outcome of a disease or ailment; the prospect of recovery as evaluated by a medical professional.

What is the definition of 'syndrome' in medicine?

A syndrome is a group of symptoms that consistently occur together or characterize a particular disease or abnormality.

What's the difference between 'acute' and 'chronic' when describing a condition?

Acute conditions have a rapid onset and are usually short-lived, while chronic conditions develop slowly and last for a long time, often for months or years.

What does it mean for a treatment to be 'palliative'?

Palliative care focuses on providing relief from the symptoms and stress of a serious illness to improve quality of life for both the patient and the family. It's not about curing the disease.

Can you define 'iatrogenic' in medicine?

Iatrogenic refers to a condition, illness, or injury caused by medical examination or treatment. Essentially, it's a side effect or complication resulting from medical intervention.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to common medical terms, with descriptions:

- 1.

Anatomy of Understanding: A Lexicon of the Human Body

This comprehensive lexicon delves into the intricate terminology used to describe the human body. It goes beyond simple definitions, exploring the etymology of medical terms and their historical context. Readers will gain a deeper appreciation for how anatomical structures are named and understood within the medical field, making it an invaluable resource for students and enthusiasts alike.

2.

Physiology Explained: The Language of Life Processes

This book unravels the complex language of human physiology, defining key terms related to bodily functions and systems. It clarifies concepts such as homeostasis, cellular respiration, and nerve impulse transmission in an accessible manner. The text aims to demystify the processes that keep us alive, providing clarity for those seeking to grasp the mechanics of life.

3.

Pathology's Lexicon: Decoding Disease and Diagnosis

Navigate the world of disease and diagnosis with this essential guide to pathological terminology. It systematically defines terms related to the causes, mechanisms, and effects of illness. From cellular changes to macroscopic manifestations, this book equips readers with the vocabulary needed to comprehend medical diagnoses and the study of disease.

4.

Pharmacology's Glossary: The Science of Medicines

This volume serves as a comprehensive glossary for the field of pharmacology, defining terms related to drug action, administration, and effects. It covers crucial concepts such as pharmacokinetics, pharmacodynamics, and therapeutic classes. Understanding these terms is fundamental to comprehending how medications work and their impact on the body.

5.

Microbiology Made Clear: Terms of the Microscopic World

Explore the fascinating realm of microorganisms with this book, which clarifies essential microbiological terminology. It defines terms related to bacteria, viruses, fungi, and parasites, as well as their interactions with hosts. This guide is perfect for anyone wanting to understand infections, immunity, and the hidden microbial forces shaping our world.

6.

Cardiology's Compass: Navigating Heart and Vessel Terms

This book provides a clear and concise guide to the specialized language of cardiology. It defines terms related to the heart's structure, function, and common ailments. From understanding arrhythmias to interpreting diagnostic tests, this resource helps demystify the complex vocabulary surrounding cardiovascular health.

7.

Neurology's Narrative: Understanding the Brain and Nerves

Delve into the intricate world of the nervous system with this book, which defines the language of neurology. It covers terms related to the brain, spinal cord, and peripheral nerves, as well as conditions affecting them. The book aims to make complex neurological concepts accessible and understandable for a broad audience.

8.

Oncology's Outline: Defining Cancer and Its Treatments

This book offers a structured approach to understanding the terminology of oncology, the study of cancer. It defines key terms related to cancer types, stages, cell biology, and therapeutic interventions. The goal is to provide clarity and context for individuals learning about cancer diagnosis, treatment, and research.

9.

Radiology's Rosetta Stone: Deciphering Imaging Terminology

Unlock the secrets of medical imaging with this guide to radiology's lexicon. It defines terms used to describe X-rays, CT scans, MRIs, and other diagnostic imaging techniques. Understanding this specialized vocabulary is crucial for interpreting medical images and appreciating the advancements in diagnostic technology.

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