



# **Basic medical terms guide**

This guide provides an overview of some basic medical terms, For a fuller description go to the *Online Medical Dictionary* at <http://www.mydr.com.au/tools/Dictionary.asp>

## A

**ABC:** The 'ABC' of resuscitation or life support means to check Airways, Breathing and Circulation.

**ACUTE:** When applied to a medical condition, this term means 'of severe, sudden, but short duration'. As opposed to **CHRONIC**.

**ACUTE MYOCARDIAL INFARCTION:** Onset of sudden damage to part of the heart muscle, usually due to blockage of the heart's (coronary) arteries. Synonymous with a heart attack.

**ADDICTION:** In the context of this handbook, the habitual taking of drugs or alcohol due to a physical and/or psychological dependency.

**AFEBRILE:** Without fever. As opposed to **FEBRILE**.

**AIDS:** see **AUTOIMMUNE DEFICIENCY SYNDROME**.

**ALCOHOLISM:** Where any physical, mental or social problem caused by alcohol is present.

**ALLERGY:** Sensitivity to a foreign substance, resulting in a physical reaction such as rash or hay fever.

**AMBULANT:** Able to walk.

**ANAEMIA:** A decrease in the concentration of red blood cells or of **HAEMOGLOBIN** in the blood. May cause pallor (paleness) of the skin.

**ANGINA:** Cardiac pain due to poor blood supply to the heart.

**ANOREXIA:** Loss of appetite.

**ANOXIA:** Without oxygen

**ANTI-ANXIETY (medication):** Prescribed drugs used to treat anxiety disorders.

**ANTIBIOTIC:** A drug that destroys bacteria.

**ANTIBODY:** A substance produced by the immune system to fight invading organisms such as viruses.

**ANTIDEPRESSANT (medication):** Prescribed drugs used to treat depression.

**ANTIPSYCHOTIC (medication):** Prescribed drugs used to treat psychosis.

**ANXIETY:** A state of tension affecting the mind and the body. Anxiety can range from acute (short term) to chronic (long term).

**APERIENT:** A laxative (to move the bowels)

**APPENDICITIS:** Inflammation of the appendix, a hollow finger-like projection of the colon.

**ARREST:** Used in a medical sense, this means a cessation of bodily activity (for example, cardiac arrest means that the heart has stopped beating and respiratory arrest means cessation of breathing).

**ARTHRITIS:** Inflammation of a joint. See also INFLAMMATION

**ASTHMA:** A lung disease characterised by difficulty in breathing and by coughing and wheezing.

**ATAXIA:** A jerky unsteadiness of the limbs and body due to disease in a particular part of the brain.

**AURA:** A visual disturbance occurring prior to an epileptic fit.

**AUTOIMMUNE DEFICIENCY SYNDROME:** Commonly referred to as AIDS, it implies loss of immune system function.

## **B**

**BACTERIA:** Microscopic organisms that cause infection and which can reproduce themselves

**BASELINE BLOOD TEST:** Basic tests done in initial stages of a medical investigation.

**BCG:** The 'Bacille Calmett-Guerin' (tuberculosis or TB) vaccination. [see 'Mantoux test']

**BRONCHIAL:** Of the larger airways of the lungs.

**BRONCHITIS:** Infection of the larger airways of the lungs.

## **C**

**CAROTID:** The large artery beside the larynx which is ideal for emergency checking of the pulse.

**CHRONIC:** Long term. As opposed to ACUTE.

**CIRRHOSIS:** Condition of the liver where it becomes shrunken, hardened and fails to function normally.

**COGNITION:** The area of more sophisticated mental functioning (intelligence, judgment, insight, memory and so on).

COMA: A persistent state of unconsciousness.

CONCUSSION: Loss of consciousness due to severe head injury.

CORONER: A magistrate appointed to investigate the cause of death in certain situations, for instance a sudden unexpected death.

CPR: Cardio-Pulmonary-Resuscitation (active combined resuscitation of the heart and lungs).

CVD: Cardio Vascular Disease

## **D**

DELIRIUM TREMENS (the DTs): A serious state of delirium due to alcohol withdrawal. Due to overactivity of the nervous system.

DELUSION: A false idea or belief held by a person that cannot be corrected by reasoning.

DEMENTIA: Partial or total loss of personality and other significant mental functions, due to mental deterioration, but without psychosis.

DEPENDENCY: Describes an ongoing need for a substance to prevent unpleasant symptoms. May be psychological or physical.

DEPERSONALISATION: A subjective experience where there is a feeling of being disconnected from the body or from the immediate environment.

DEPRESSION: An unpleasant, unhappy state of mind and body with significant impairment of memory, concentration and other mental processes. Physical activity is also slowed.

DERMATITIS: Inflammation of the skin.

DETOXIFICATION: Removal over time of toxic (drugs/alcohol etc.) substances from the body.

DIABETES: A disease with abnormally high blood sugar. Due to lack of insulin.

DIABETIC: A patient with diabetes.

DIAGNOSIS: Determination of the cause and severity of a disease.

DISASSOCIATION: See DEPERSONALISATION.

DISORIENTATION: Inability to recognise time or surroundings or identify oneself or another person.

DRUG WITHDRAWAL: The process where a toxic substance (drug) is naturally removed from the body. Subjectively unpleasant.

**DUPEYTRON'S CONTRACTURE:** Deformity of the hand, with the fingers in a claw-like position.

**DYSPNOEA:** Difficulty in breathing.

## **E**

**ECG:** Electrocardiogram. An electrical recording of activity of the heart. May indicate either angina or a heartbeat rhythm problem.

**ECT:** Electroconvulsive Therapy. Used in the treatment of severe depression.

**EEG:** Electro-encephalogram. An electrical recording of brain activity.

**EMPHYSEMA:** A lung disease with loss of lung tissue. Occurs in cigarette smokers.

**EPILEPSY:** The occurrence of convulsions (involuntary bodily movements) due to abnormal electrical discharges in the brain.

**EPISTAXIS:** Bleeding of the nose.

## **F**

**FEBRILE:** The presence of fever. As opposed to AFEBRILE.

**FEVER:** A temperature above the normal level of 37 degrees Celsius.

**FISTULA:** A site where one bodily organ has formed an abnormal opening into another.

**FITS:** (1) The occurrence of epilepsy. See EPILEPSY. (2) The street name (slang) for hypodermic syringes.

**FRACTURE:** A broken bone.

## **G**

**GALLSTONES:** A common disease where firm 'stones' accumulate in the gall bladder.

**GASTRITIS:** Inflammation of the lining of the stomach, with pain and/or vomiting.

**GASTRO-ENTERITIS:** Inflammation of the stomach and intestine, with vomiting and/or diarrhoea.

**GENERIC:** When used in regard to health care, implies nonspecialised, or not specifically related to, a particular group, service, company etc.

## **H**

**HAEMATEMESIS:** Vomiting of pure blood or blood mixed with stomach contents.

HAEMATOMA: Medical name for a well demarcated 'bruise'.

HAEMATURIA: Blood in the urine.

HAEMOGLOBIN: A complicated iron-containing protein and found in red blood cells. It carries oxygen to the tissues. See also ANAEMIA.

HAEMOPTYSIS: Coughing up of blood. May be difficult to distinguish from HAEMATEMESIS.

HAEMORRHAGE: Loss of blood from the body, either internally or externally.

HALLUCINATION: A false sensory perception of one or more of the senses (vision, hearing, taste, smell, touch).

HEART ATTACK: A general term referring to an acute affliction of the heart. Usually refers to ACUTE MYOCARDIAL INFARCTION, but may be used to describe acute onset of a disturbance to heartbeat rhythm.

HEART DISEASE: Any disease affecting the heart.

HEART FAILURE: Where the heart fails to perform its job of pumping blood to the lungs and to the remainder of the body..

HEPATITIS: Inflammation of the liver; usually due to toxic substances such as alcohol or to viral infections such as the Hepatitis C virus.

HERNIA: The abnormal protrusion of the contents of one part of the body into another.

HIV: see HUMAN IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS.

HOSPICE: A small hospital for the terminally ill.

HUMAN IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS: A virus which infects the human immune system, impeding its operation.

HYPERGLYCAEMIA: A blood sugar level above normal, which is indicative of diabetes. Compare to HYPOGLYCAEMIA

HYPERTENSION: Blood pressure above normal; sometimes inaccurately used to describe stress.

HYPERVENTILATION: Breathing at a rate above normal, and often due to anxiety.

HYPOGLYCAEMIA: A low blood sugar level. Usually due to an excessive insulin dose. Compare to HYPERGLYCAEMIA.

HYPOTENSION: Low blood pressure.

HYPOTHERMIA: A low body temperature, which may be life threatening.

## **I**

**INCONTINENCE:** Loss of control of the bladder and/or bowel.

**INFECTION:** Invasion of the body by harmful organisms that cause disease.

**INFLAMMATION:** The body's reaction to injury. Signs of inflammation are redness, heat, swelling and tenderness. See also **ARTHRITIS**.

**INSOMNIA:** Inability to sleep.

**INSULIN:** A substance produced by the pancreas; needed to convert sugar to energy. Lacking in diabetics.

**INTRAVENOUS:** Within the vein, as with injections into a vein.

**ISCHAEMIA:** Lack of blood supply to an area of the body. For example, cardiac ischaemia, which may cause angina. If severe, cardiac ischaemia may cause a heart attack.

## **J**

**JAUNDICE:** Yellow discolouration of the skin and eyes due to liver disease.

## **K**

**KORSAKOFF'S SYNDROME:** Sufferers show amnesia and confabulation (filling in gaps in memory by guessing); due to the end stage of alcoholism. Connected with the Alcohol Related Brain Injury Syndrome.

## **L**

**LUNG CLOT:** see **PULMONARY EMBOLUS**.

## **M**

**MANIA:** An elated, overactive state of mind and body, with restlessness and euphoria.

**MANIPULATION (medical):** Manual movement of a body part to more acceptable position.

**MANTOUX TEST:** A skin test given to assist in the diagnosis of tuberculosis.

**MENINGITIS:** Inflammation of the meninges, a collection of three protective membranes surrounding the brain.

**MIGRAINE:** A headache with specific characteristics and due to disturbances to the blood vessels in the head.

**MORBIDITY:** (1) Description of the outcomes of disease. (2) The relative incidence of a particular disease in a specific locality.

**MUNCHAUSEN SYNDROME:** An aberrant condition involving fabrication of an illness to attract medical attention. Sufferers seek numerous medical consultations with different doctors.

## **N**

**NAUSEA:** An unpleasant sick feeling in the stomach area.

**NEBULISER:** A device powered by an air pump which converts a liquid to a fine spray for inhalation. Often used by asthma sufferers.

**NEURITIS:** Inflammation of neural tissue.

**NEUROSIS:** A mental condition with many variations, but most commonly with anxiety due to various causes such as stress or previous difficult life experiences. The personality is usually not severely affected.

**NIGHT SWEATS:** Excessive night-time sweating May indicate serious disease, for example TB.

## **O**

**OEDEMA:** Fluid in the tissues.

**OESOPHAGUS:** The part of the digestive tract between mouth and stomach. Synonymous with the gullet.

**ORIENTATION:** The ability of a person to reliably establish their position regarding time, place and persons.

**OVERDOSE:** Administration of an excessive amount of a drug or substance into the body.

## **P**

**PALLIATIVE CARE:** Care aimed at minimising pain and suffering without aiming to effect a cure.

**PALPITATIONS:** Awareness of the heartbeat; not necessarily due to heart disease.

**PANCREAS:** A gland that lies behind the stomach. It produces insulin.

**PANCREATITIS:** Inflammation of the pancreas organ.

**PARALYSIS:** Loss of movement of any part of the body due to nerve damage.

**PARANOIA:** A form of schizophrenia involving delusions, hallucinations, fear of persecution, and undue suspicion of others.

**PATHOLOGICAL:** Related to an abnormality or disease.

**PEDICULOSIS:** Infestation of the skin by the pediculosis louse. Also known as scabies.

**PEPTIC:** Related to stomach acid, as in 'peptic ulcer'. See also **STOMACH ULCER**.

**PELVIC INFLAMMATORY DISEASE:** An infection of all or part of the female reproductive tract.

**PERSONALITY DISORDER:** A behavioural disorder that is not due to anxiety, mood disturbance or psychosis.

**PHLEBITIS:** Inflammation of a vein.

**PHOBIA:** An irrational fear of a situation, person or object.

**PNEUMONIA:** Infection of the lung tissue.

**PNEUMOTHORAX:** Condition with increase in air pressure in the chest cavity resulting in collapse of the lung.

**PROGNOSIS:** The likely final medical outcome of an illness, in terms of time and condition.

**PSYCHOSIS:** An extreme derangement of the mind, due to mental illness, with total loss of judgment, memory and insight. It may be a temporary, intermittent or permanent condition.

**PSYCHOSOMATIC:** Bodily symptoms associated with a nervous complaint or psychological disorder.

**PSYCHOTHERAPY:** Counselling treatment for mental illness.

**PULMONARY:** Of the lungs or bronchial system.

**PULMONARY EMBOLUS:** Lodgment of an embolus (mobile blood clot) in the lung tissue.

**PULSE:** The rhythmic expansion of an artery which can be felt.

**PUNCTURED LUNG:** See **PNEUMOTHORAX**.

## **R**

**RAPPORT:** The situation whereby a facilitative and empathic understanding develops between the health care worker and his/her client/patient.

**RESUSCITATION (cardiac):** See **CPR**.

## **S**

**SCABIES:** An inflammatory skin condition due to the pediculosis louse. See **PEDICULOSIS**.

**SCHIZOPHRENIA:** A nervous disorder characterised by disturbances to normal thought processes.

**SEPSIS:** Infection.

**SHOCK:** (1) A state of dangerously low blood pressure. (2) A state of mental distress.

**SIGN (of illness):** An observable indication of illness.

**SINUS:** (1) Facial sinus: A cavity in the skull bones. (2) An abnormal opening in a body organ, e.g. skin sinus (an opening in the skin that is discharging).

**SPLEEN:** A richly perfused organ in the upper left abdominal area which is unfortunately prone to trauma. It is part of the immune system.

**SPUTUM:** Phlegm (secretions coughed up from the lungs).

**STERNUM:** The middle chest bone where ribs from each side of the body meet.

**STEROID:** A group of chemical substances produced by the adrenal glands. May have anabolic (body building), or anti-inflammatory, or other properties.

**STOMACH ULCER:** An ulcer within the lining of the stomach. Synonymous with peptic ulcer. See also **PEPTIC** and **ULCER**.

**STROKE:** The result of damage to part of the brain; usually associated with weakness, numbness or paralysis.

**SYMPTOM:** A specific feeling or physical manifestation due to an illness.

**SYNDROME:** A group of symptoms due to a particular disease.

## **T**

**TB:** see **TUBERCULOSIS**.

**TETANUS:** A serious bacterial infection beginning in unclean wounds, and at risk of causing paralysis.

**THIAMINE:** Vitamin B1. An important vitamin needed for the heart and brain; often low in alcoholics.

**TOLERANCE:** A process where the body adapts to administration of a foreign substance, resulting in the need for more of the drug to achieve the same effect.

**TRANSFERENCE:** The unconscious tendency to transfer to another person significant feelings and attitudes that are your own and which are excessive.

**TUBERCULOSIS:** A serious bacterial infection of the lungs or (sometimes) of the kidneys. Also referred to as 'TB'.

## **U**

**ULCER:** Loss of the surface tissue layer of an organ (e.g. skin, stomach lining, cornea) is known as *ulceration*. See also **STOMACH ULCER**.

**URGENCY (of symptoms):** Sudden involuntary urges to pass urine, etc.

**UROLOGICAL:** Of the bladder, kidneys or urinary system.

## **V**

**VIRUS:** An infective particle much smaller than a bacteria. Requires 'host' cells (for example human cells) to reproduce. Not destroyed by antibiotics.

## **W**

**WHEEZE:** Breathing characterised by a whistling noise. Usually due to asthma.

**WITHDRAWAL:** See **DRUG WITHDRAWAL**.