Home Pharmacy Glossary of Medical Terms

- **Abdomen**: The belly, that part of the body that contains all of the structures between the chest and the pelvis. The abdomen is separated anatomically from the chest by the diaphragm, the powerful muscle spanning the body cavity below the lungs.

- **Abdominal**: Relating to the abdomen, the belly, that part of the body that contains all of the structures between the chest and the pelvis. The abdomen is separated anatomically from the chest by the diaphragm, the powerful muscle spanning body cavity below the lungs.

- **Abdominal pain**: Pain in the belly (the abdomen). Abdominal pain can come from conditions affecting a variety of organs. The abdomen is an anatomical area that is bounded by the lower margin of the ribs above, the pelvic bone (pubic ramus) below, and the flanks on each side. Although abdominal pain can arise from the tissues of the abdominal wall that surround the abdominal cavity (the skin and abdominal wall muscles), the term abdominal pain generally is used to describe pain originating from organs within the abdominal cavity (from beneath the skin and muscles). These organs include the stomach, small intestine, colon, liver, gallbladder, and pancreas.

- **Acetaminophen**: A pain reliever and fever reducer. Brand name: Tylenol. The exact mechanism of action of acetaminophen is not known. Acetaminophen relieves pain by elevating the pain threshold. Acetaminophen reduces fever through its action on the heat-regulating center (the "thermostat") of the brain. Generic is available.

- **Aleve**: See: Naproxen.

- **Aluminum**: A naturally occurring element that makes up about 8% of the surface of the earth and is always found combined with other elements such as oxygen, silicon, and fluorine. Aluminum is the most common metallic element in the earth's crust but has no clear biologic role. Everyone is exposed to low levels of aluminum from food, air, and water. Exposure to high levels of aluminum may result in respiratory problems (aluminosis). Inhalation of bauxite fumes may cause pulmonary fibrosis. Aluminum in the bloodstream may lead to neurological symptoms and may be fatal.

- **Anaprox**: See: Naproxen.

- **Anesthetic**: A substance that causes lack of feeling or awareness. A local anesthetic causes loss of feeling in a part of the body. A general anesthetic puts the person to sleep.

- **Antihistamines**: Drugs that combat the histamine released during an allergic reaction by blocking the action of the histamine on the tissue. Therefore, antihistamines do not stop the allergic reaction but protect tissues from some of its effects. Antihistamines frequently cause mouth dryness and sleepiness.
Antihistamine side effects that very occasionally occur include urine retention in males and fast heart rate.

- **Arthritis**: Inflammation of a joint. When joints are inflamed they can develop stiffness°, warmth, swelling, redness and pain. There are over 100 types of arthritis. (see osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, psoriatic arthritis, lupus, gout).
- **Aspirin**: A good example of a tradename° that entered into the language, Aspirin was once the Bayer trademark° for acetylsalicylic acid.
- **Bacteria**: Single-celled microorganisms which can exist either as independent (free-living) organisms or as parasites (dependent upon another organism for life).
- **Bacterial**: Of or pertaining to bacteria. For example, a bacterial lung infection.
- **Bicarbonate**: In medicine, bicarbonate usually refers to bicarbonate of soda (sodium bicarbonate, baking soda) white powder that is common ingredient in antacids. Also, the bicarbonate level is an indirect measure of the acidity of the blood that is determined when electrolytes are tested.
- **Blood**: The familiar red fluid in the body that contains white and red blood cells, platelets, proteins, and other elements. The blood is transported throughout the body by the circulatory system. Blood functions in two directions: arterial and venous. Arterial blood is the means by which oxygen and nutrients are transported to tissues while venous blood is the means by which carbon dioxide is transported to the lungs and kidneys, respectively, for removal from the body.
- **Blood pressure**: The blood pressure is the pressure of the blood within the arteries. It is produced primarily by the contraction of the heart muscle. It's measurement is recorded by two numbers. The first (systolic pressure) is measured after the heart contracts and is highest. The second (diastolic pressure) is measured before the heart contracts and lowest. A blood pressure cuff is used to measure the pressure. Elevation of blood pressure is called "hypertension".
- **Bowel**: Another name for the intestine. The small bowel and the large bowel are the small intestine and large intestine, respectively.
- **Bronchitis**: Inflammation and swelling of the bronchi. Bronchitis can be acute or chronic.
- **Calcium**: A mineral found mainly in the hard part of bones, where it is stored. Calcium is added to bones by cells called osteoblasts and is removed from bones by cells called osteoclasts. Calcium is essential for healthy bones. It is also important for muscle contraction, heart action, nervous system maintenance, and normal blood clotting. Food sources of calcium include dairy foods, some leafy green vegetables such as broccoli, canned salmon, clams, oysters, calcium-fortified foods.
- **Caps**: Abbreviation for capsules.
• **Chest**: The area of the body located between the neck and the abdomen. The chest contains the lungs, the heart and part of the aorta. The walls of the chest are supported by the dorsal vertebrae, the ribs, and the sternum.

• **Chest pain**: There are many causes of chest pain. One is angina which results from inadequate oxygen supply to the heart muscle. Angina can be caused by coronary artery disease or spasm of the coronary arteries. Chest pain can also be due to a heart attack (coronary occlusion) and other important diseases such as, for example, dissection of the aorta and a pulmonary embolism. Do not try to ignore chest pain and "work (or play) though it." Chest pain is a warning to seek medical attention.

• **Chickenpox**: A highly infectious viral disease also known medically as varicella -- in many countries, this disease is always called "varicella" -- that causes a blister-like rash, itching, fatigue and fever. The rash crops up first on the face and trunk and can spread over the entire body resulting in 250 to 500 itchy blisters.

• **Cholesterol**: The most common type of steroid in the body. However, cholesterol is a critically important molecule.

• **Chronic**: This important term in medicine comes from the Greek chronos, time and means lasting a long time.

• **Cirrhosis**: An abnormal liver condition characterized by irreversible scarring of the liver. Alcohol and viral hepatitis B and C are among the many causes of cirrhosis. Cirrhosis can cause yellowing of the skin (jaundice), itching, and fatigue. Diagnosis of cirrhosis can be suggested by physical examination and blood tests, and can be confirmed by liver biopsy in some patients. Complications of cirrhosis include mental confusion, coma, fluid accumulation, internal bleeding, and kidney failure. Treatment of cirrhosis is designed to limit any further damage to the liver as well as complications. Liver transplantation is becoming an important option for patients with advanced cirrhosis.

• **Common cold**: A viral upper respiratory tract infection. This contagious illness can be caused by many different types of viruses, and the body can never build up resistance to all of them. For this reason, colds are a frequent and recurring problem. In fact kindergarten children average 12 colds per year, while adolescents and adults have around seven colds per year.

• **Condition**: The term "condition" has a number of biomedical meanings including the following:
  - An unhealthy state, such as in "this is a progressive condition."
  - Something that is essential to the occurrence of something else; essentially a "precondition."
  - As a verb: to cause a change in something so that a response that was previously associated with a certain stimulus becomes associated with another stimulus; to condition a person, as in behavioral conditioning.
• **Constipation:** Infrequent (and frequently incomplete) bowel movements. The opposite of diarrhea, constipation is commonly caused by irritable bowel syndrome, diverticulosis, and medications (constipation can paradoxically be caused by overuse of laxatives). Colon cancer can narrow the colon and thereby cause constipation. The large bowel (colon) can be visualized by barium enema X-rays, sigmoidoscopy, and colonoscopy.

• **Cough:** A rapid expulsion of air from the lungs typically in order to clear the lung airways of fluids, mucus, or material.

• **Decongestant:** A drug that shrinks the swollen membranes in the nose and makes it easier to breathe. Decongestants can be taken orally or by nasal spray. Decongestant nasal sprays should not be used for more than five days without the doctor's advice, and if so, usually only when accompanied by a nasal steroid. Many decongestant nasal sprays often cause a rebound effect if taken too long. A rebound effect is the worsening of symptoms when a drug is discontinued. This is a result of a tissue dependence on the medication. Decongestants should not be used by patients with high blood pressure (hypertension) unless under doctor's supervision.

• **Diabetes:** Refers to diabetes mellitus or, less often, to diabetes insipidus. Diabetes mellitus and diabetes insipidus share the name "diabetes" because they are both conditions characterized by excessive urination (polyuria).

• **Dizziness:** Painless head discomfort with many possible causes including disturbances of vision, the brain, balance (vestibular) system of the inner ear, and gastrointestinal system.

• **Earache:** Pain in the ear. This can occur because of conditions within the ear itself, the ear canal, or the visible external portion of the ear. Acute infection of the middle ear, medically called acute otitis media, is inflammation of the middle ear and is the most frequent diagnosis in sick children in the US. The eustachian tube is shorter in children than adults which allows easy entry of bacteria and viruses into the middle ear, resulting in acute otitis media in childhood. Infection of the ear canal (otitis externa) is also called swimmer's ear. Otitis externa is typically caused by bacterial infection. Earache can also be due to pain and inflammation of the outer portion of the ear. A child with a draining ear should not fly (or swim).

• **Esophagus:** The tube that connects the pharynx (throat) with the stomach. The esophagus lies between the trachea (windpipe) and the spine. It passes down the neck, pierces the diaphragm just to the left of the midline, and joins the cardiac (upper) end of the stomach. In an adult, the esophagus is about 25 centimeters (10 inches) long. When a person swallows, the muscular walls of the esophagus contract to push food down into the stomach. Glands in the lining of the esophagus produce mucus, which keeps the passageway moist and facilitates swallowing. Also known as the gullet or swallowing tube. From the Greek oisophagos, from oisein meaning to bear or carry + phagein, to eat.
- **Expectorant**: A medication that helps bring up mucus and other material from the lungs, bronchi, and trachea. An example of an expectorant is guaifenesin which promotes drainage of mucus from the lungs by thinning the mucus and also lubricates the irritated respiratory tract. Sometimes the term "expectorant" is incorrectly extended to any cough medicine. From the Latin expectorare, to expel from the chest, from ex-, out of + pectus, chest.

- **Fever**: Although a fever technically is any body temperature above the normal of 98.6 degrees F. (37 degrees C.), in practice a person is usually not considered to have a significant fever until the temperature is above 100.4 degrees F (38 degrees C.).

- **Generic**: 1. The chemical name of a drug. 2. A term referring to the chemical makeup of a drug rather than to the advertised brand name under which the drug may be sold. 3. A term referring to any drug marketed under its chemical name without advertising.

- **Ginger**: A perennial tropical herb that has been used as a treatment for nausea and bowel spasms.

- **Headache**: A pain in the head with the pain being above the eyes or the ears, behind the head (occipital), or in the back of the upper neck. Headache, like chest pain or back ache, has many causes.

- **Heart**: The muscle that pumps blood received from veins into arteries throughout the body. It is positioned in the chest behind the sternum (breastbone; in front of the trachea, esophagus, and aorta; and above the diaphragm muscle that separates the chest and abdominal cavities. The normal heart is about the size of a closed fist. It is cone-shaped, with the point of the cone pointing down to the left. Two-thirds of the heart lies in the left side of the chest with the balance in the right chest. Heart attack: The death of heart muscle due to the loss of blood supply. The loss of blood supply is usually caused by a complete blockage of a coronary artery, one of the arteries that supplies blood to the heart muscle. Death of the heart muscle causes chest pain and electrical instability of the heart muscle tissue.

- **Heart disease**: Any disorder that affects the heart. Sometimes the term "heart disease" is used incorrectly as a synonym for coronary artery disease. Heart disease is synonymous with cardiac disease but not with cardiovascular disease which is any disease of the heart or blood vessels. Among the many types of heart disease, see, for example: Angina; Arrhythmia; Congenital heart disease;

- **Herbal**: 1. An adjective, referring to herbs, as in an herbal tea. 2. A noun, usually reflecting the botanical or medicinal aspects of herbs; also a book which catalogs and illustrates herbs.
- **Histamine:** Substance that plays a major role in many allergic reactions. Histamine dilates blood vessels and makes the vessel walls abnormally permeable.
- **Ibuprofen:** A non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) commonly used to treat pain, swelling, and fever. Common brand names for Ibuprofen include Advil, Motrin, and Nuprin.
- **Immune:** Protected against infection. The Latin immunis means free, exempt.
- **Inflammation:** A basic way in which the body reacts to infection, irritation or other injury, the key feature being redness, warmth, swelling and pain. Inflammation is now recognized as a type of nonspecific immune response.
- **Injury:** The term "injury" may be applied in medicine to damage inflicted upon oneself as in a hamstring injury or by an external agent on as in a cold injury. The term "injury" may be synonymous (depending on the context) with a wound or with trauma.
- **Insomnia:** The perception or complaint of inadequate or poor-quality sleep because of one or more of the following: difficulty falling asleep; waking up frequently during the night with difficulty returning to sleep; waking up too early in the morning; or unrefreshing sleep. Insomnia is not defined by the number of hours of sleep a person gets or how long it takes to fall asleep. Individuals vary normally in their need for, and their satisfaction with, sleep. Insomnia may cause problems during the day, such as tiredness, a lack of energy, difficulty concentrating, and irritability.
- **Liver:** An organ in the upper abdomen that aids in digestion and removes waste products and worn-out cells from the blood. The liver is the largest solid organ in the body. The liver weighs about three and a half pounds (1.6 kilograms). It measures about 8 inches (20 cm) horizontally (across) and 6.5 inches (17 cm) vertically (down) and is 4.5 inches (12 cm) thick.
- **Magnesium:** A mineral involved in many processes in the body including nerve signaling, the building of healthy bones, and normal muscle contraction. About 350 enzymes are known to depend on magnesium.
- **Medication:** 1. A drug or medicine. 2. The administration of a drug or medicine. (Note that "medication" does not have the dangerous double meaning of "drug.")
- **Mouth:** 1. The upper opening of the digestive tract, beginning with the lips and containing the teeth, gums, and tongue. Foodstuffs are broken down mechanically in the mouth by chewing and saliva is added as a lubricant. Saliva contains amylase, an enzyme that digests starch. 2. Any opening or aperture in the body.
- **Mucus:** A thick slippery fluid produced by the membranes lining certain organs such as the nose, mouth, throat, and vagina. Mucus is the Latin word for "a semifluid, slimy discharge from the nose." Note that mucus is a noun while the adjective is mucous.
• **Naproxen**: A non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) used for the management of mild to moderate pain, fever, and inflammation. Brand names for naproxen include Anaprox, Naprelan, Naprosyn, and Aleve.

• **Nausea**: It is the urge to vomit. It can be brought by many causes including, systemic illnesses, such as influenza, medications, pain, and inner ear disease. When nausea and/or vomiting are persistent, or when they are accompanied by other severe symptoms such as abdominal pain, fever, or bleeding, a physician should be consulted.

• **Pain**: An unpleasant sensation that can range from mild, localized discomfort to agony. Pain has both physical and emotional components. The physical part of pain results from nerve stimulation. Pain may be contained to a discrete area, as in an injury, or it can be more diffuse, as in disorders like fibromyalgia. Pain is mediated by specific nerve fibers that carry the pain impulses to the brain where their conscious appreciation may be modified by many factors.

• **Pharmacy**: A location where prescription drugs are sold. A pharmacy is, by law, constantly supervised by a licensed pharmacist.

• **Pharyngitis**: Inflammation of the pharynx (the hollow tube in the back of the throat about 5 inches long that starts behind the nose and ends at the top of the trachea). Pharyngitis is popularly known as a sore throat.

• **Physicians' Desk Reference**: A thick volume that provides a guide to all prescription drugs available in the United States. The PDR is a key reference to the American pharmacopeia.

• **Poison**: Any substance that can cause severe distress or death if ingested, breathed in, or absorbed through the skin. Many substances that normally cause no problems, including water and most vitamins, can be poisonous if taken in too large of a quantity. Poison treatment depends on the substance: if there are treatment instructions on the substance's container and you are sure it contained no other item, follow those directions immediately. Always contact your nearest Poison Control Center if you are concerned about possible poison ingestion.

• **Prescription**: A physician's order for the preparation and administration of a drug or device for a patient. A prescription has several parts. They include the superscription or heading with the symbol "R" or "Rx", which stands for the word recipe (meaning, in Latin, to take); the inscription, which contains the names and quantities of the ingredients; the subscription or directions for compounding the drug; and the signature which is often preceded by the sign "s" standing for signa (Latin for mark), giving the directions to be marked on the container.

• **Rebound**: Return of the original symptoms when maneuvers or treatment is discontinued.
• **Reflux:** The term used when liquid backs up into the esophagus from the stomach.

• **Sore:** 1. (adjective) A popular term for painful. I have sore fingers from typing dictionary terms. She has a sore throat. 2. (noun) A nondescript term for nearly any lesion of the skin or mucous membranes. He has a number of sores in his mouth.

• **Sore throat:** Pain in the throat. Sore throat may be caused by many different causes, including inflammation of the larynx, pharynx, or tonsils.

• **Stomach:** 1. The sac-shaped digestive organ that is located in the upper abdomen, under the ribs. The upper part of the stomach connects to the esophagus, and the lower part leads into the small intestine.

• **Stroke:** The sudden death of some brain cells due to a lack of oxygen when the blood flow to the brain is impaired by blockage or rupture of an artery to the brain. A stroke is also called a cerebrovascular accident or, for short, a CVA.

• **Symptom:** Any subjective evidence of disease. Anxiety, lower back pain, and fatigue are all symptoms. They are sensations only the patient can perceive. In contrast, a sign is objective evidence of disease. A bloody nose is a sign. It is evident to the patient, doctor, nurse and other observers.

• **Syndrome:** A set of signs and symptoms that tend to occur together and which reflect the presence of a particular disease or an increased chance of developing a particular disease.

• **Throat:** The throat is the anterior (front) portion of the neck beginning at the back of the mouth, consisting anatomically of the pharynx and larynx. The throat contains the trachea and a portion of the esophagus.

• **Tonsillitis:** Inflammation of the of a tonsil, typically as a result of infection by either a virus or bacteria.

• **Trauma:** Any injury, whether physically or emotionally inflicted. "Trauma" has both a medical and a psychiatric definition. Medically, "trauma" refers to a serious or critical bodily injury, wound, or shock. This definition is often associated with trauma medicine practiced in emergency rooms and represents a popular view of the term. In psychiatry, "trauma" has assumed a different meaning and refers to an experience that is emotionally painful, distressful, or shocking, which often results in lasting mental and physical effects.

• **Viruses:** Small living particles that can infect cells and change how the cells function. Infection with a virus can cause a person to develop symptoms.