



## Words 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, upon hearing “keep your glucose in a normal range,” people know what normal means about a person, and they may have a range in their kitchen, but they may miss the intended concept in terms of health care. Even people who understand the concept may need more information than the phrase provides. They need to be told what glucose measurements are considered normal.

Words with a Latin or Greek prefix present special problems. The health science field is full of such words. Here is a small sampling: pre-op, post-op, prenatal, premature, unsweetened, decontaminate, antibacterial. For example, the risk factor for poor readers with diabetes is that they may recognize one part of the word, such as the sweetened in unsweetened, and then skip the un. This kind of guessing can lead to the opposite behavior.

Four kinds of words cause much of the misunderstanding:

- Medical words
- Value judgment words
- Concept words
- Category 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.

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

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

| <b>Problem Word</b> | <b>Consider Using</b>  |
|---------------------|--|
| Adequate            | Enough<br><i>Example (adequate water): 6-8 glasses a day</i>   |
| Adjust              | Fine-tune; change  |
| Cautiously          | With care; slowly<br><i>Example: making sure to hold on to handrails</i>   |
| Excessive           | Too much<br><i>Example (bleeding): if blood soaks through the bandage</i>  |
| Increase gradually  | Add to<br><i>Example (exercise): add 5 minutes a week</i>  |
| Moderately          | Not too much<br><i>Example (exercise): so you don't get out of breath</i>  |
| Progressive         | Gets worse (or better)   |
| Routinely           | Often<br><i>Example: every week; every other day</i>   |
| Significantly       | Enough to make a difference<br><i>Example (smoking/ heart disease): 2 times the chance of having heart disease</i> |
| Temporary           | For a limited time; for about (an hour, day...)<br><i>Example: for less than a week</i>                            |

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

| <b>Problem Word</b> | <b>Consider Using</b>  |
|---------------------|--|
| Active role         | Taking part in   |
| Avoid               | Stay away from; do not use (or eat)                          |
| Collaborate         | Work together  |
| Factor              | Other thing  |
| Gauge               | Measure; get a better idea of; test (dependent on context)   |
| Intake              | What you eat or drink; what goes into your body              |
| Landmark            | Very important (adj.)<br>Important event; turning point (n.) |
| Option              | Choice   |
| Referral            | Ask you to see another doctor; get a second opinion          |
| Wellness            | Good health; feeling good                                    |

**Category Word Examples:** Words that describe a group or sub-set, and may be unfamiliar.

| <b>Problem Word</b>     | <b>Consider Using</b>   |
|-------------------------|---|
| 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 (Advil is brand name) |
| Noncancerous            | Not cancer  |
| 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                   |

Note: This resource was originally developed by the Partnership for Clear Health Communication.

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