

Lost in translation?

A confidence-boosting introduction to medical terminology for first-year medical students



Welcome to med school and your first language lesson...

Pretty soon, you'll start hearing words like proximal, distal and lateral. If you're thinking, "Should I know this already?" Simply put, no. Nobody starts medical school speaking medical terminology fluently.

These terms may feel unfamiliar, but it doesn't stay that way for long. This guide won't make you fluent, but it should help you to feel a little more confident.



Learn with confidence

The goal isn't to know every answer. Instead, the goal is to recognise medical language and keep building from there.

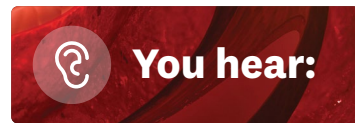
Every doctor started the same way.
Now, it's your turn.



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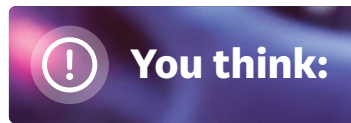
Advancing human progress together

Parlez-vous *anatomy*?



You hear:

“The rectus abdominis muscle is located on the anterior abdominal wall.”



You think:

HELP!



Here's what it means:

The rectus abdominis muscle is found at the front part of the abdomen. *Simple...*

Let's look at some more directional terminology to get you on the right path.

Term	Meaning	Example
Anterior	Towards the front	<i>The chest is anterior to the back</i>
Posterior	Towards the back	<i>The spine is posterior to the heart</i>
Superior	Towards the head	<i>The chest is superior to the hip, but inferior to the neck</i>
Inferior	Towards the feet	<i>The stomach is inferior to the heart</i>
Medial	Towards the midline	<i>Our eyes are medial to our ears</i>
Lateral	Away from the midline	<i>The ears are lateral to the eyes, meaning they are farther from the midline of the head</i>
Proximal	Closer to the point of attachment	<i>The thigh is proximal to the foot because it is closer to the trunk of the body</i>
Distal	Further from the point of attachment	<i>The foot is distal to the thigh since it is farther from the trunk</i>

Still getting the hang of things? Here are four important terms you should know.

Laterality terms:

Unilateral

means a structure is only found on one side of the body, such as the spleen

Bilateral

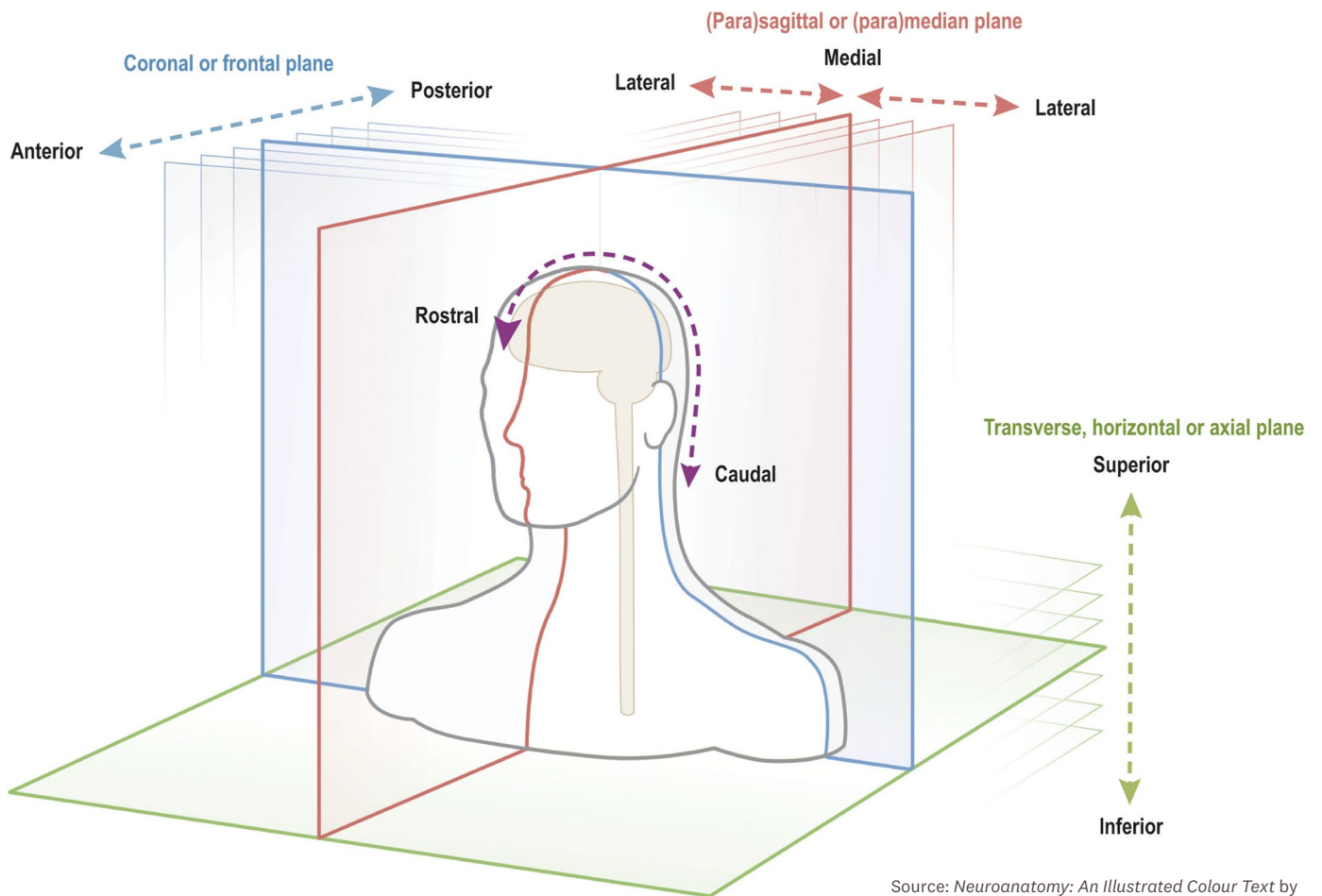
refers to paired structures found on both sides, like the limbs or lungs

Ipsilateral

describes structures that are on the same side of the body, for example, the left arm and left hand

Contralateral

means structures are on opposite sides, such as the left hand and right hand



Source: *Neuroanatomy: An Illustrated Colour Text* by Crossman, Alan R. Copyright © 2025 by Elsevier.

In neuroanatomy, we say:

Rostral

meaning towards the head

"The nose is rostral to the neck."

Caudal

meaning towards the tail

"The coccyx is caudal to the lumbar vertebrae."

Dorsal

meaning towards the back

"The spine is dorsal to the stomach."

Ventral

meaning towards the belly

"The belly button is ventral to the backbone."



Remember:

You'll see these words and many more throughout your first year. The more you see them, the more familiar they'll become. Soon, you'll be speaking fluent anatomy.

Cracking *the code*

Medical words aren't random. They're built. Start recognising the building blocks and you'll unlock your understanding.

Prefixes are short parts added to the *beginning* of words to change their meaning. Learning these prefixes can help you understand many medical terms, even if you haven't seen them before.

For example, knowing that "hyper-" means "too much" can help you guess what "hyperthyroidism" means.



Common prefixes

hyper-

More than normal

Hyperthyroidism

hypo-

Less than normal

Hypothyroidism

dys-

Disordered

Dysplasia

meta-

Change

Metaplasia

neo-

New

Neoplasia

ana-

Absence

Anaphylaxis



Look out for them

You will see these prefixes again and again.
Every time you do, they'll become a little more familiar.



Begin with *the end*

Conversely, **suffixes** are added to the *end* of words to also change their meaning and describe conditions, processes or characteristics.

Understanding suffixes helps you quickly identify what a medical term is referring to, such as inflammation “-itis” or a tumour “-oma.”

The end of a medical word often tells you what’s happening.

Common suffixes

-itis

**Inflammatory
process**

Arthritis

-oma

Tumour

Carcinoma

-osis

State or condition

Osteoarthritis

-oid

Resembling

Rheumatoid disease

-penia

Lack of

Thrombocytopenia

-cytosis

**Increased number
of cells**

Leucocytosis

-ectasis

Dilatation

Bronchiectasis

-plasia

Disorder of growth

Hyperplasia

-opathy

Abnormal state

Lymphadenopathy

We like to move it, *move it*

These terms help describe and understand how joints and limbs move during everyday activities. You already know these movements. Now, let's learn what doctors call them.

Flexion

means bending a joint to bring two parts closer together, usually reducing the angle between them

Extension

is the opposite — straightening a joint to increase the angle and move parts further apart

Dorsiflexion

is moving the top of the foot upwards towards the shin, while

Plantarflexion

is pointing the toes downwards, like standing on tiptoes

Abduction

moves a limb away from the body's midline, and

Adduction

brings it back towards the midline

Circumduction

is a circular movement that combines flexion, extension, abduction, and adduction

Rotation

means turning a body part around its long axis, like shaking your head “no”

Pronation and supination

describe turning the forearm so that the palm faces down (pronation) or up (supination)

Eversion and inversion

are movements of the foot: eversion turns the sole outwards and inversion turns it inwards

Opposition

is moving the thumb to touch another finger, and

Reposition

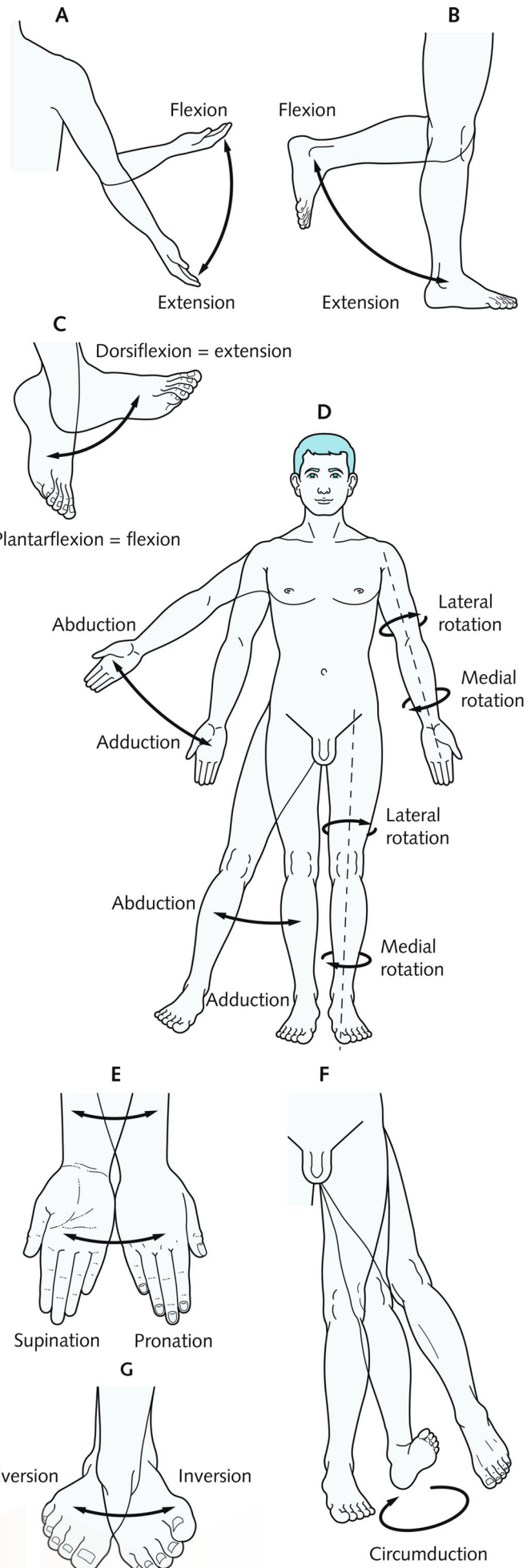
is moving it back

Protrusion/protraction

means moving a part forward (like sticking out your jaw or tongue), while

Retrusion/retraction

means pulling it back



More words you'll hear *again* *and again*

Acute

**Rapid onset of
symptoms**

Subacute

**Symptoms develop
over days**

Chronic

**Symptoms develop
gradually over
months or years**



You're ready

You've already taken the first small step towards learning the language of medicine!

Over the next weeks and months, you'll hear these words in lectures, anatomy practicals, Osmosis videos, 3D anatomy images on Complete Anatomy, in discussions with new med student friends and on ClinicalKey Student. And now, they'll already feel familiar.

Continue learning with confidence. *You've got this.*



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