

# Medical Terminology

## Flashcard Study Guide

### Chapter 32: Vital Signs

50 terms

Each card contains:

**Term** | Syllables | *Pronunciation* | Definition |  *Memory trick*

## Chapter 32 — Vital Signs

### Acute pain

a · cute pain *uh-KYOOT payn*

Sudden onset pain that typically has a clear cause and resolves as healing occurs. It serves as a protective warning signal that something is wrong in the body.

 *Acute = sharp and sudden (like a knife is acute-angled). Acute pain comes on fast and has a cause you can identify.*

### Afebrile

a · feb · rile *ay-FEB-rile*

Without fever; having a normal body temperature. An afebrile patient has a temperature within the normal range of 97–99°F (36.1–37.2°C).

 *'A' = without + 'febrile' = fever. Afebrile = no fever. Think: 'A = Absent fever.'*

### Anthropometry

an · thro · pom · e · try *an-throh-POM-eh-tree*

The measurement of the human body including height, weight, and body proportions. Used in medical settings to track growth, nutritional status, and health trends.

 *'Anthropo' = human + 'metry' = measurement. Anthropometry = measuring the human body.*

### Apical

ap · i · cal *AP-ih-kul*

Referring to the apex (tip) of the heart. The apical pulse is heard at the apex of the heart using a stethoscope, located at the 5th intercostal space, midclavicular line.

 *Apex = tip. Apical pulse = listening at the tip/point of the heart. Think 'apex' → 'apical.'*

### Apnea

ap · ne · a *AP-nee-uh*

The temporary cessation of breathing lasting at least 10 seconds. In vital signs, apnea is a critical finding requiring immediate intervention.

 *'A' = without + 'pnea' = breathing. Apnea = absent breathing. A = Absent breath.*

## Arrhythmia

ar · rhyth · mi · a *ay-RITH-mee-uh*

An abnormal heart rate or rhythm — too fast, too slow, or irregular. Arrhythmias range from benign to life-threatening and are detected on ECG or by pulse assessment.

💡 'A' = *without* + 'rhythm' = *regular beat*. Arrhythmia = *without normal rhythm*. The heart is 'off beat.'

## Asymptomatic

a · symp · to · mat · ic *ay-simp-toh-MAT-ik*

Having a disease or condition without showing any signs or symptoms. Many conditions (like hypertension) can be asymptomatic for years.

💡 'A' = *without* + 'symptomatic' = *having symptoms*. No symptoms = *asymptomatic*. The 'silent' stage of disease.

## Basal metabolism

ba · sal me · tab · o · lism *BAY-sul meh-TAB-oh-liz-um*

The minimum amount of energy required by the body at rest to maintain basic life functions (breathing, circulation, cell production). Measured as basal metabolic rate (BMR).

💡 Basal = *base/bottom level*. Basal metabolism = *the bare minimum energy to keep you alive at complete rest*.

## Baseline

base · line *BAYS-line*

The initial measurement taken at the start of care against which future measurements are compared. Establishing a patient's baseline vital signs helps identify significant changes.

💡 Baseline = *the starting line*. Like a runner's starting position — all future vital sign changes are measured from this point.

## Bounding pulse

bound · ing pulse *BOWN-ding puls*

A pulse that feels abnormally strong and forceful, often due to high cardiac output, fever, or anxiety. The pulse is easily palpable and seems to 'leap' under the fingers.

💡 Bounding = *jumping/leaping*. A bounding pulse feels like it's jumping out at your fingers — strong and forceful.

## Bradycardia

brad · y · car · di · a *brad-ee-KAR-dee-uh*

An abnormally slow heart rate, below 60 beats per minute in adults. Can be normal in athletes or indicate cardiac or other medical problems.

💡 'Brady' = *slow* (think: Brady from Brady Bunch moves slowly) + 'cardia' = *heart*. Slow heart = bradycardia.

## Bradypnea

brad · yp · ne · a *brad-ip-NEE-uh*

Abnormally slow respiratory rate, below 12 breaths per minute in adults. May indicate CNS depression, medication overdose, or metabolic problems.

💡 *'Brady' = slow + 'pnea' = breathing. Bradypnea = breathing too slowly. Brady = slow (same root as bradycardia).*

## Chronic pain

chron · ic pain *KRON-ik payn*

Pain that persists for more than 3–6 months, often beyond the expected healing time. May have no clear ongoing cause and significantly affects quality of life.

💡 *Chronic = long-lasting (chronic = 'Kronos' the god of time in Greek). Chronic pain = pain that won't go away with time.*

## Clinical diagnosis

clin · i · cal di · ag · no · sis *KLIN-ih-kul dye-ag-NOH-sis*

A diagnosis made based on physical examination findings, patient history, and clinical observation without relying on laboratory or imaging results.

💡 *Clinical = bedside (from 'kline' = bed in Greek). Clinical diagnosis = what you figure out by examining the patient, not from lab tests.*

## Diastolic blood pressure

di · as · tol · ic blood pres · sure *dye-as-TOL-ik blud PRESH-ur*

The pressure in the arteries when the heart is at rest between beats. The lower number in a blood pressure reading (e.g., the 80 in 120/80 mmHg).

💡 *Diastolic = the 'D'own number (bottom). The heart is Downtime/resting. Diastolic = Down/resting pressure.*

## Differential diagnosis

dif · fer · en · tial di · ag · no · sis *dif-er-EN-shul dye-ag-NOH-sis*

A list of possible diagnoses ranked by likelihood based on symptoms, history, and test results. The clinician works through possibilities to identify the correct diagnosis.

💡 *'Differential' = distinguishing between options. A differential diagnosis = listing and ruling out possibilities, like a process of elimination.*

## Dysrhythmia

dys · rhyth · mi · a *dis-RITH-mee-uh*

Abnormal electrical activity in the heart causing an irregular heart rhythm. Used interchangeably with arrhythmia; both refer to abnormal heart rhythm.

💡 *'Dys' = abnormal/bad + 'rhythm.' Dysrhythmia = bad rhythm. Same as arrhythmia — the heart's beating pattern is off.*

## Eupnea

eup · ne · a *YOOP-nee-uh*

Normal, unlabored breathing at a rate of 12–20 breaths per minute in adults with regular depth and rhythm. The baseline normal respiratory pattern.

💡 *'Eu' = good/normal (like euphoria = good feeling) + 'pnea' = breathing. Eupnea = good, normal breathing.*

## Febrile

feb · rile *FEB-rile*

Having a fever; a body temperature above the normal range (above 99°F/37.2°C orally). Febrile states often indicate infection or inflammation.

💡 *'Febrile' sounds like 'February' — when it's cold out, people get febrile (feverish). Febrile = feverish.*

## Frenulum linguae

fren · u · lum lin · guae *FREN-yoo-lum LING-gwee*

The small fold of tissue under the tongue that connects it to the floor of the mouth. Oral thermometers are placed beside this structure under the tongue.

💡 *'Frenulum' = small bridle/restraint + 'linguae' = of the tongue. It's the tongue's bridle — the tissue that keeps it from moving too freely.*

## Hyperpyrexia

hy · per · py · rex · i · a *hye-per-pye-REK-see-uh*

An extremely high fever above 106°F (41.1°C). A medical emergency that can cause brain damage, organ failure, and death if not rapidly treated.

💡 *'Hyper' = extreme/excessive + 'pyrexia' = fever. Hyperpyrexia = dangerously high fever. Hyper = over the top.*

## Hypertension (HTN)

hy · per · ten · sion *hye-per-TEN-shun*

Abnormally high blood pressure, consistently 130/80 mmHg or higher. A major risk factor for heart attack, stroke, and kidney disease.

💡 *'Hyper' = high + 'tension' = pressure. High pressure in the vessels. HTN = the 'silent killer' — often no symptoms.*

## Hypotension

hy · po · ten · sion *hye-poh-TEN-shun*

Abnormally low blood pressure, below 90/60 mmHg. Can cause dizziness, fainting, and in severe cases, shock.

💡 *'Hypo' = low/under + 'tension' = pressure. Low blood pressure. Hypo = low (like a hypodermic needle goes UNDER the skin).*

## Hypothermia

hy · po · ther · mi · a *hye-poh-THER-mee-uh*

An abnormally low body temperature below 95°F (35°C), caused by prolonged exposure to cold. Can be life-threatening as it slows body functions.

💡 *'Hypo' = low + 'therm' = heat. Low body heat = hypothermia. Hypo-THERM-ia = low THERMAL (heat) condition.*

## Hypoventilation

hy · po · ven · ti · la · tion *hye-poh-ven-tih-LAY-shun*

Breathing that is too shallow or slow to meet the body's needs, resulting in CO<sub>2</sub> buildup and decreased oxygen in the blood.

💡 *'Hypo' = insufficient + 'ventilation' = air movement. Not enough air moving in and out — CO<sub>2</sub> builds up.*

## Intermittent pulse

in · ter · mit · tent pulse *in-ter-MIT-ent puls*

A pulse that occasionally skips or is absent, indicating an irregular heartbeat. Beats may be missing at irregular intervals.

💡 *'Intermittent' = stopping and starting. Like an intermittent WiFi signal — the pulse keeps dropping out.*

## Korotkoff sounds

Ko · rot · koff sounds *kuh-ROT-koff sowndz*

The sounds heard through a stethoscope when measuring blood pressure with a sphygmomanometer. The first sound marks systolic pressure; the last marks diastolic pressure.

💡 *Named after Dr. Nikolai Korotkoff who discovered them. Five distinct phases — Phase I = systolic, Phase V = diastolic.*

## Manometer

ma · nom · e · ter *muh-NOM-eh-ter*

A gauge that measures pressure, specifically the pressure of gas or liquid. In blood pressure measurement, the manometer shows the pressure in the cuff.

💡 *'Mano' = pressure + 'meter' = measure. A manometer measures pressure — like the pressure gauge on the BP cuff.*

## Medical diagnosis

med · i · cal di · ag · no · sis *MED-ih-kul dye-ag-NOH-sis*

The identification of a disease or condition based on symptoms, physical examination, and diagnostic tests. Only licensed practitioners (physicians, NPs, PAs) can make a medical diagnosis.

💡 *Medical diagnosis = the official verdict on what's wrong. Remember: MAs gather information but do NOT diagnose.*

## Metabolism

me · tab · o · lism *meh-TAB-oh-liz-um*

All chemical processes in the body that convert food and oxygen into energy. Includes both building up (anabolism) and breaking down (catabolism) processes.

💡 *Metabolism = your body's engine. Fast metabolism = burns fuel quickly. Slow metabolism = burns fuel slowly.*

## Orthostatic hypotension

or · tho · stat · ic hy · po · ten · sion *or-thoh-STAT-ik hye-poh-TEN-shun*

A drop in blood pressure of 20+ mmHg systolic or 10+ mmHg diastolic within 3 minutes of standing. Causes dizziness or fainting when rising from sitting or lying.

💡 *'Ortho' = upright + 'static' = standing. Blood pressure drops when you stand up — the head rushes feel dizzy.*

## Palpatory method

pal · pa · tor · y meth · od *PAL-puh-tor-ee METH-ud*

A technique of estimating systolic blood pressure by feeling (palpating) the radial pulse while deflating the blood pressure cuff, without using a stethoscope.

💡 *'Palpatory' = using touch/palpation. You feel for the pulse instead of listening for it. Palp = feel.*

## Phantom pain

phan · tom pain *FAN-tum payn*

Pain perceived in a limb or body part that has been amputated. The brain continues to receive pain signals from the area even though the limb is gone.

💡 *Phantom = ghost. Phantom pain = pain from a 'ghost limb' that no longer exists. The brain hasn't accepted the loss.*

## Prognosis

prog · no · sis *prog-NOH-sis*

A medical opinion about the likely outcome or course of a disease and the chance of recovery. Based on statistical data and individual patient factors.

💡 *'Pro' = before + 'gnosis' = knowledge. Prognosis = knowing beforehand what will happen. The expected future outcome.*

## Pulse deficit

pulse def · i · cit *puls DEF-ih-sit*

The difference between the apical and radial pulse rates. A deficit indicates some heartbeats are not strong enough to produce a palpable radial pulse.

💡 *Deficit = shortage. A pulse deficit = some beats are 'missing' at the wrist that you can hear at the heart. The wrist pulse is less.*

## Pulse pressure

pulse pres · sure *puls PRESH-ur*

The difference between systolic and diastolic blood pressure readings. Normal is 40 mmHg. Wide or narrow pulse pressure can indicate cardiovascular problems.

💡 *Pulse pressure = systolic MINUS diastolic. If BP is 120/80, pulse pressure = 40. The gap between the two numbers.*

## Pyrexia

py · rex · i · a *pye-REK-see-uh*

The medical term for fever — an abnormally elevated body temperature above 99°F (37.2°C). The body's response to infection or inflammation.

💡 *Pyrexia = pyro = fire. Fever = your body is 'on fire.' Pyrexia comes from the same root as pyrotechnics.*

## Radiating pain

ra · di · at · ing pain *RAY-dee-ay-ting payn*

Pain that spreads outward from the point of origin to surrounding areas. Classic example: cardiac pain radiating from the chest to the left arm, jaw, or shoulder.

💡 *Radiating = spreading outward like radio waves. Heart attack pain radiates from chest to arm — a classic pattern.*

## Referred pain

re · ferred pain *reh-FERD payn*

Pain felt in a location different from the actual source of injury or disease. The brain misidentifies the origin of pain signals traveling through shared nerve pathways.

💡 *Referred = sent elsewhere. Pain is referred (sent) to a different location than where it originates. Brain gets the 'wrong address.'*

## Respiratory cycle

res · pi · ra · tor · y cy · cle *RES-pih-ruh-tor-ee SYE-kul*

One complete breath consisting of one inhalation (inspiration) followed by one exhalation (expiration). Normal rate is 12–20 cycles per minute in adults.

💡 *One IN + one OUT = one respiratory cycle. Like a pump cycle — in and out = one complete round.*

## Rhythm

rhyth · m *RITH-um*

In vital signs, the regularity of the intervals between heartbeats or breaths. Normal rhythm is regular; abnormal includes irregular, regularly irregular, or irregularly irregular.

💡 *Rhythm = the beat pattern. Regular rhythm = equal spacing between beats. Irregular = unequal spacing, like an off-beat drum.*

## Sphygmomanometer

sphyg · mo · ma · nom · e · ter *sfig-moh-muh-NOM-eh-ter*

The instrument used to measure blood pressure, consisting of an inflatable cuff, pressure gauge, and (for manual models) a stethoscope. Commonly called a blood pressure cuff.

💡 *'Sphygmo' = pulse + 'manometer' = pressure meter. It measures pulse pressure. Hard to say — 'sfig-mo-mah-NOM-eh-ter.'*

## Subjective symptom

sub · jec · tive symp · tom *sub-JEK-tiv SIMP-tum*

A symptom that can only be perceived and reported by the patient, not observed or measured by others. Examples include pain, nausea, dizziness, and fatigue.

💡 *Subjective = only YOU can feel it. Pain is subjective — only the patient knows how much it hurts. Can't be measured by outsiders.*

## Syncope

syn · co · pe *SIN-koh-pee*

Fainting — a temporary loss of consciousness caused by reduced blood flow to the brain. Caused by dehydration, prolonged standing, vasovagal response, or cardiac issues.

💡 *Syncope = 'sinky' — the patient goes down/sinks. They faint. 'SIN-koh-pee' = sinks away suddenly.*

## Systolic blood pressure

sys · tol · ic blood pres · sure *sis-TOL-ik blud PRESH-ur*

The pressure in the arteries when the heart contracts and pumps blood. The higher (top) number in a blood pressure reading (e.g., the 120 in 120/80 mmHg).

💡 *Systolic = the 'S'queeze number (top). The heart Squeezes = Systolic. S = Squeeze = top number.*

## Tachycardia

tach · y · car · di · a *tak-ee-KAR-dee-uh*

An abnormally fast heart rate, above 100 beats per minute in adults. May be caused by fever, anxiety, dehydration, blood loss, or cardiac arrhythmia.

💡 *'Tachy' = fast (tachometer measures speed) + 'cardia' = heart. Fast heart = tachycardia. Tachy = speedy.*

## Tachypnea

tach · yp · ne · a *tak-ip-NEE-uh*

Abnormally rapid breathing, above 20 breaths per minute in adults. Can indicate fever, anxiety, respiratory distress, or metabolic acidosis.

💡 *'Tachy' = fast + 'pnea' = breathing. Tachypnea = breathing too fast. Same 'tachy' prefix as tachycardia.*

## Thread pulse

thread pulse *thred puls*

A pulse that is extremely weak, thin, and difficult to palpate, often barely perceptible. Indicates severely reduced cardiac output, as in shock or severe blood loss.

💡 *Thread = thin like a thread of string. A thready pulse is barely there — like trying to feel a thread under your fingers.*

## Tympanic membrane thermometer

tym · pan · ic mem · brane ther · mom · e · ter *tim-PAN-ik MEM-brayn ther-MOM-eh-ter*

A thermometer that measures body temperature by detecting infrared heat from the eardrum (tympanic membrane). It provides a quick, non-invasive temperature reading.

*💡 Tympanic = eardrum (drum = tympanum in Latin). The ear thermometer reads the heat from your eardrum with an infrared sensor.*

## Volume

vol · ume *VOL-yoom*

In the context of pulse assessment, volume refers to the strength or amplitude of the pulse. It reflects the amount of blood pumped with each heartbeat.

*💡 Volume = how strong the beat feels. Low volume = weak pulse (thready). High volume = strong pulse (bounding). Like turning up the volume.*