Good Questions for Your Good Health

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
- Concept words
- Category words
- Value judgment words

Often these kinds of words can be made understandable by explaining them with common words, by an example, or by a visual.

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Medical Word Examples: Words frequently used by doctors and in health care instructions.

Problem Word	Consider Using
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

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

Problem Word	Consider Using
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.) Important event; turning point (n.)
Option	Choice
Referral	Ask you to see another doctor; get a second opinion
Wellness	Good health; feeling good

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

Problem Word	Consider Using
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

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

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

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