

GLOSSARY OF MEDICAL TERMS IN LAY LANGUAGE

The CSM Working Group on Patient Information recognises that users may not be familiar with the terms used in patient information leaflets to describe unwanted effects of a medicine.

In order to promote consistency and to aid production of clear and understandable leaflets, the MHRA and the Working Group have developed the attached list of medical terms with suggested wording suitable for lay readers to describe possible adverse effects of a medicine. The list is not comprehensive and further terms will be added in the future.

Term	Proposed lay term
Agranulocytosis	Severe reduction in number of white blood cells which makes infections more likely
Alopecia	Hair loss
Amenorrhoea	Absence of menstrual periods
Anaemia	Reduction in red blood cells which can make the skin pale and cause weakness or breathlessness
Anaphylactic, anaphylactoid reaction	Serious allergic reaction which causes difficulty in breathing or dizziness
Angina pectoris	Chest pain
Angioedema, angioneurotic oedema	Serious allergic reaction which causes swelling of the face or throat
Anorexia	Loss of appetite
Aplastic anaemia	Severe reduction in blood cells which can cause weakness, bruising or make infections more likely
Arrhythmia	Irregular heart beat
Arthralgia	Joint pain
Aspartame aminotransferase increased, alanine aminotransferase increased, LFT increased	Blood tests which show changes in the way the liver is working
Asthenia	Feeling of weakness
Ataxia	Difficulty in controlling movements

Bradycardia	Slower heart beat
Bronchoconstriction, bronchospasm	Difficulty in breathing or wheezing
Cardiac failure, heart failure	Heart problems which can cause shortness of breath or ankle swelling
Cerebrovascular accident	Stroke
Colitis	Inflammation which causes abdominal pain or diarrhoea
Convulsion or seizure	Fit
Deep vein thrombosis / venous thromboembolism (VTE)	Blood clot, usually in a leg, which causes pain swelling or redness
Diplopia	Double vision
Dysarthria	Difficulty in speaking
Dysmenorrhoea	Painful periods
Dyspepsia	Indigestion
Ectopic pregnancy	Pregnancy outside the womb which can cause severe pain, bleeding or collapse
Electrocardiogram QT prolonged	Abnormal ECG heart tracing
Emotional lability	Mood swings
Enuresis	Bedwetting
Epistaxis	Nosebleed
Haemorrhage	Bleeding
Haemorrhoids (Piles)	Swelling of blood vessels around the
Hyperhidrosis	Increased sweating
Haemolytic anaemia	Reduction in red blood cells which can make the skin pale yellow and cause weakness or breathlessness

Hypo/hyperkalaemia	Hypokalaemia: low blood levels of potassium which can cause muscle weakness, twitching or abnormal heart rhythm Hyperkalaemia: high levels of blood potassium which can cause abnormal heart rhythm
Hypo/hypernatraemia	Hyponatraemia: low blood levels of sodium which can cause tiredness and confusion, muscle twitching, fits and coma Hypernatraemia: high levels of blood sodium which can cause confusion, muscle twitching or abnormal heart rhythm
Hypomania	Feeling over-excited
Hypo/hypertension	Low/high blood pressure
Hypo/hyperthyroidism	Hypothyroidism: Underactive thyroid gland which can cause tiredness or weight gain Hyperthyroidism: Overactive thyroid gland which can cause increased appetite, weight loss or sweating
Insomnia	Difficulty in sleeping
Jaundice	Yellowing of the skin or whites of the eyes caused by liver or blood problems
Mania	Feeling elated or over-excited, which causes unusual behaviour
Myalgia	Muscle pain
Myocardial infarction	Heart attack
Myopathy	Pain or weakness in muscles
Nausea	Feeling sick
Nephritis	Inflammation of the kidney which can cause swollen ankles or high blood pressure

Palpitations	Feeling your heartbeat
Orthostatic hypotension/postural hypotension	A fall in blood pressure on standing up which causes dizziness, light-headedness or fainting
Pancreatitis	Inflammation of the pancreas, which causes severe pain in the abdomen and back
Pancytopenia	Severe reduction in blood cells which can cause weakness, bruising or make infections more likely
Paraesthesia of extremities	Tingling or numbness in the hands or feet
Parkinsonism	Tremor, stiffness and shuffling
Periorbital oedema	Swelling around the eyes
Peripheral neuropathy	A disorder of the nerves which can cause weakness, tingling or numbness
Peripheral oedema	Swelling of the ankles, feet or fingers
Pneumonitis	Inflammation of the lungs which causes breathlessness, cough and raised temperature
Prostatism	An enlarged prostate gland which causes difficulty in passing urine in men
Pruritis	Itching
Pulmonary embolism	Blood clot in the lungs which causes chest pain and breathlessness
Pulmonary fibrosis	Scarring of the lungs which causes shortness of breath
Pyrexia	Fever
Raynaud's phenomenon	Poor blood circulation which makes the toes and fingers numb and pale
Rhabdomyolysis	Abnormal muscle breakdown which can lead to kidney problems

Rhinitis	Swelling and irritation inside the nose
Somnolence	Sleepiness
Stevens-Johnson Syndrome	Serious illness with blistering of the skin, mouth, eyes and genitals
Syncope	Fainting
Systemic lupus erythematosus	Allergic condition which causes joint pain, skin rashes and fever
Tachycardia	Faster heart beat
Tardive dyskinesia	Uncontrollable movements of mouth, tongue and limbs
Thrombocytopenia	Reduction in blood platelets, which increases risk of bleeding or bruising
Tinnitus	Ringling in the ears
Torsades de pointes (also ventricular arrhythmias)	Life-threatening irregular heart beat
Toxic epidermal necrolysis	Serious illness with blistering of the skin
Tremor	Shaking
Uveitis	Inflammation of the eye which causes pain and redness
Vasculitis	Inflammation of blood vessels, often with skin rash
Ventricular fibrillation	Life-threatening irregular heartbeat
Vertigo	A feeling of dizziness or “spinning”

Principles for developing definitions:

1. How to use these definitions: the wording of each leaflet should be considered individually to ensure that the specific information for that medicine is conveyed accurately and in a way that is comprehensible to most of the intended readers. User testing will help to identify if there are specific problems in comprehension or interpretation. This should focus in particular on any areas where the patient has to take action if an adverse effect is suspected.
2. When to use lay definitions: definitions should be used when the medical term is not well known in the general population.
3. Level of detail: it will be appropriate to include more details to enable the reader to identify possible symptoms of an adverse effect where this is a key safety issue and the patient should take action to prevent further harm. It may be appropriate to group effects into broad categories such as “heart problems” and provide a lesser degree of detail for very rare and minor effects where specific instructions on action are not needed.
4. General format: the standard format is to describe what the condition is and then what a sufferer may feel. This latter is to help patients in identifying whether they may be suffering from the effect described. This may not be necessary if the condition is well known or the symptoms obvious from the description of the condition.
5. Inclusion of medical terms: pharmaceutical companies should also consider including the medical term where this is an important feature and may help the reader interpret other sources of information about the medicine.
6. Where to use these definitions: these definitions should be used to describe adverse effects of the medication. They may also be used in other sections such as warnings but may not be necessary. For example, a patient suffering from myasthenia gravis would usually recognise the name of the condition. However, a brief description of the type of condition may be helpful to other users.
7. Alternative wordings: there may be circumstances where alternative wording is considered more appropriate, in which case justification should be provided.
8. Serious: use this term to indicate that the condition is usually medically significant (e.g. is likely to require medical attention, such as hospitalisation). For example, Stevens-Johnson syndrome causes serious blistering and anaphylaxis is a serious allergic reaction. This is not necessary when the seriousness of the condition is obvious or well known.
9. Severe: where necessary to distinguish from symptoms or medical effects that might otherwise be considered as mild (e.g. severe headache, or severe pain accompanying myocardial infarction).

10. Life-threatening: this should be used very rarely and where this is not obvious. The term should be reserved for a condition that of itself is usually fatal if untreated (in more than 50% of cases).
11. Brackets: use these for the medical term where it is helpful to quote this.
12. “Quote marks”: use rarely when needed to distinguish colloquial descriptive terms not to be taken literally, such as feeling “high”, from other terms.