

Medical Terms You Need to Know

Doctors aren't always easy to understand. Often, they use words you might not know. Learning the meanings of medical terms that healthcare providers use frequently can help you understand your condition and treatment options better. These are common terms used in the diagnosis and care of neuromuscular diseases. Not all terms apply to all neuromuscular diseases, so the words your provider uses will depend on your particular diagnosis.

aspiration (*as-puh-RAY-shun*) When food or liquid accidentally enters the windpipe instead of the digestive tract.

ataxia (*ah-TAK-see-ah*) The inability to maintain balance and coordination.

atrophy (*A-truh-fee*) A decrease in the size and mass of muscle tissue.

autoimmune disorder (*ah-toh-im-YOON*) A disease characterized by an inappropriate attack of the immune system on the body's own tissues.

cardiac arrhythmia (*ay-RITH-mee-ah*) Abnormal heartbeat.

cardiomyopathy (*kar-dee-oh-mye-AH-pah-thee*) A condition in which the heart muscle is weakened, making it harder for the heart to pump blood to the body.

cognitive disorder (*KOG-ni-tiv*) A condition in which abilities involving thinking, such as memory, speech, and the ability to learn, are disrupted.



contracture (*kon-TRAK-cher*) A shortening of muscles or tendons around joints that can limit mobility.

creatin kinase (CK) (*KREE-ah-teen KYE-nays*) An enzyme found in muscle tissues that is released into the blood by muscle damage.

distal muscles (*DI-stuhl MUH-suls*) Muscles farthest away from the body center, such as those of the lower arms, legs, hands, and feet.

dysarthria (*di-SAR-three-ah*) Difficulty speaking or forming words.

dysphagia (*dis-FAY-jee-ah*) Difficulty swallowing.

dyspnea (*DISP-nee-ah*) Difficulty breathing.

electrodiagnostic testing (*elec-troh-dyeig-NOS-tik*) Medical testing that records the electrical activity of body parts to provide information about the effects of disease.

fasciculation (*fah-sik-yoo-LAY-shun*) Muscle twitching.

genetic disorder (*juh-NEH-tik*) A medical condition caused by changes in a person's DNA.

genetic mutation A flaw in the DNA code.

genetic testing Medical testing that identifies changes in DNA and can help confirm the diagnosis of a genetic disorder.

gene therapy (*JEEN THER-uh-pee*) The introduction of new genetic material into a person or other organism in order to treat an inherited disorder or other disease.

hypertrophy (*hye-PER-truh-fee*) Overgrowth of muscle.

hypotonia (*hye-puh-TOH-nee-ah*) Poor muscle tone.

mitochondrial disease (*mye-toh-KON-dree-ul*) A condition that occurs when mitochondria, the structures that produce energy for a cell, malfunction.

motor neuron disease (*NOO-ron*) A condition that causes motor neurons, nerves that transmit signals to muscles, to lose function over time, thereby affecting the muscles' ability to function.

muscle biopsy (*BYE-op-see*) A procedure that takes a small tissue sample from a person in order to perform laboratory testing on the sample for an infection or disease.

muscle atrophy (*A-truh-fee*) Loss of muscle mass and strength.

muscular dystrophy (*MUH-skew-lar DI-struh-fee*) A term that refers to a number of diseases that cause progressive loss of muscle mass, resulting in weakness and sometimes loss of mobility.

musculoskeletal examination (*muh-skew-loh-SKEH-leh-tul*) A physical assessment of the appearance, alignment, and range of motion of joints in the body to screen for abnormalities.

myalgia (*mye-AL-jee-ah*) Muscle pain.

myopathy (*mye-OP-ah-thee*) A disease that causes weakness in the muscles that control voluntary movement in the body.

nerve (*NERV*) A structure in the body that transmits electrical signals.

nerve conduction study (*kon-DUK-shun*) A medical test that measures how fast an electrical signal moves through a nerve in order to identify nerve damage.

neurologic examination (*nur-oh-LAH-jik*)

A physical assessment of a person's nervous system, including evaluation of mental, motor, and sensory functions, that can be done in a healthcare provider's office.

neuromuscular disease (*nur-oh-MUH-skew-ler*)

A condition in which the motor and sensory nerves that connect the brain and spinal cord to the rest of the body malfunction, resulting in progressive muscle weakness.

neuromuscular junction disorder

(*JUNK-shun*) A condition that is a result of the destruction, malfunction, or absence of one or more key proteins involved in the transmission of signals between muscles and nerves.

noninvasive ventilation (*non-in-VAY-siv ven-ti-LAY-shun*)

Breathing support administered through a face mask.

peripheral neuropathy

(*per-IF-er-ul nur-OP-ah-thee*) A malfunction of the nerves that can lead to sensory impairment and muscle weakness.

proximal muscles (*PROK-si-muhl*)

Muscles that are close to the body center, such as those of the shoulder, pelvis, and upper arms and legs.

ptosis (*TOH-sis*)

Drooping of the eyelids.

spasticity (*spas-TI-si-tee*)

An unusual tightness or stiffness of muscles.

scoliosis (*skoh-lee-OH-sis*)

An abnormal sideways curvature in the spine that occurs when weakened muscles are unable to hold the spine straight.

tracheostomy (*tray-kee-AH-stuh-mee*)


A medical procedure in which a tube is placed in a person's windpipe through an opening in the neck, allowing air to enter the person's lungs.

To learn more about medical terminology, contact the MDA Resource Center at **833-ASK-MDA1 (833-275-6321)** or **ResourceCenter@mdausa.org**.

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