SUPPORTING KNOWLEDGE: CLINICAL COMMUNICATION

Medical Terminology

The following is foundational knowledge that you should know before performing your duties as a Medical Assistant.

ABBREVIATION RULES OF THUMB

Abbreviations, acronyms, and symbols are the shorthand of the medical field, and they can save some time. However, shorthand lends itself to miscommunication, so it is important to use extreme caution when considering these shortcuts.

Follow these three rules of thumb when using abbreviations, acronyms, and symbols.

- Become familiar with the “Do Not Use” and “Error-Prone Abbreviations” lists. Access them online and print them. Keep them handy as a reminder of what to avoid.
- Minimize your use of abbreviations, acronyms, and symbols. Don’t set yourself up for misinterpretation of what you intend to communicate.
- Any time you have any doubts about what another staff member has communicated or documented within an abbreviation, go to that person and clarify the meaning. Remember, the safety of patients is always the primary concern.

ROOTS, PREFIXES, SUFFIXES, AND PLURALS

As familiarity with medical terminology grows, it becomes easy to notice similarities among these terms. That is because many of them share common roots, prefixes, and suffixes. Putting together these components builds many medical terms. It’s not foolproof; it doesn’t work to just mix and match three components and find a word that is in universal use. For example, “hemi” means half, “narc” means sleep, and “ism” means condition. But if a patient chronically gets half the amount of sleep he should get, he doesn’t have heminarcism. There is no such word. Also, with some combinations, the result requires interpretation, because the literal meaning might vary a little from the actual meaning. An example is antibiotic, a combination of the prefix “anti,” meaning against, and the word root “bio,” meaning life. Antibiotics are not incompatible with life. They kill a particular type of living organism, bacteria. Another thing to remember is that not all medical terms adhere to the prefix-root-suffix schema. However, looking at words that have any one of those word components in it can offer a clue to what the term means.

COMBINING FORMS

A combining form is a word root with a combining vowel. Often, the combining vowel makes the medical term easier to pronounce. In most cases, the combining vowel is an “o,” but it is sometimes “i” or “e.” A combining form should be used when the last word root in a medical term connects with a suffix that begins with a consonant. When the word root connects with a suffix that starts with a vowel, just the word root should be used. Refer to the examples below.

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PREFIXES

Prefixes are word components that appear at the beginning of a word to change the meaning of the rest of the word. They generally mean the same thing in each word they modify. Some medical terms have no prefix. An example is splenectomy, a combination of the word root “splen,” meaning spleen, and the suffix “ectomy,” meaning removal. Here is a list of some of the common prefixes medical assistants will encounter.

SUFFIXES

Suffixes are word components that appear at the end of the word to change the meaning of the rest of the word. Some medical terms have no suffix, such as appendix. Some medical terms combine a prefix and a suffix with no word root. An example is hemiplegia, a combination of the prefix “hemi,” meaning half, and the suffix “plegia,” meaning *paralysis*. Here is a list of some of the common general suffixes medical assistants will encounter, as well as some that are more specific to clinical disorders and medical, surgical, and diagnostic procedures.

RULES FOR CHANGING FROM SINGULAR TO PLURAL

Many medical terms are simply English words that follow standard rules for plural endings. Some just require adding an “s” to the end of the word. Examples are adhesions, lymphocytes, and lacerations. Others that end in “s” or “ch” require adding “es” to the end of the word. Examples are neuroses, viruses, and crutches. For nouns that end in “y” with a consonant in front of the “y,” change the “y” to “i” and add “es.” Examples are colostomies, ovaries, and arteries.

Many medical terms have their origins in other languages, often Latin, so they require a different approach. If they end in “a,” just add an “e” to the end to make it plural. Examples are conjunctivae, vertebrae, and axillae. For words that end in “um,” change the “um” to “a,” like in bacteria, diverticula, and ova. If the words end in “is,” change the “is” to “es.” For example, metastases, diagnoses, and testes. When words end in “us,” change the “us” to “i.” Examples are fungi, villi, and alveoli. Words that end in “on” are made plural by changing the “on” to “a.” For instance, ganglia, protozoa, and spermatozoa. Finally, for words that end in “ix” or “ex,” change the “ix” or “ex” to “ices,” as is the case with appendices, cortices, and cicatrices.

Keep in mind that there are exceptions to all these rules. Also, there are collective nouns that don’t require singular and plural forms. Body fluids are good examples: blood, urine, saliva, and semen. Many conditions and disorders do not have a plural form: acne, pneumonia, and hepatitis.

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