



GREEK VS. LATIN IN MEDICAL TERMINOLOGY

Medical Term Elements Classified by Body System

Medical terminology combines Greek and Latin traditions. Many structures therefore have more than one usable word element. The origin can help you predict how a term is commonly used, but it is a study guide rather than an absolute rule.

QUICK MEMORY RULE: Greek = conditions, diagnoses, procedures, and fields of study. Latin = anatomy, structures, position, and physical description.

1. The General Rule

Origin	Used Mostly For	Example
Greek	Disorders, diagnoses, scientific concepts, specialties, and many procedures	cardi/o -> cardiology
Latin	Anatomy, body structures, directional terms, and clinical descriptors	cor-/cordi- -> coronary / precordial

Why do some terms have two different roots?

- Ancient Roman medicine adopted much of its medical knowledge from Greek physicians and scholars.
- Greek remained strongly associated with disease names, specialties, and scientific terminology.
- Latin became the standard language of anatomy, universities, and formal descriptions of the body.
- Modern medical terms sometimes combine Greek and Latin elements, so exceptions are common.

Common dual-root examples

Concept	Greek element	Latin element	Typical contrast
Heart	cardi/o	cor-, cordi-	cardiology vs. coronary / precordial
Blood vessel	angi/o	vas/o	angiography vs. vascular
Kidney	nephro/o	ren/o	nephrology vs. renal
Skin	derm/o, dermat/o	cutane/o	dermatitis vs. subcutaneous
Eye	ophthalm/o	ocul/o	ophthalmology vs. ocular

REMEMBER: "Greeks named the problems; Romans named the parts" is a useful memory aid, not a perfect linguistic rule.



2. Cardiovascular System

Element	Origin	Meaning	Example
cardi/o	Greek	heart	cardiology, cardiomegaly
cor-, cordi-	Latin	heart	coronary, precordial
angi/o	Greek	vessel	angiography, angioplasty
vas/o	Latin	vessel; duct	vascular, vasodilation
arteri/o	Greek	artery	arteriosclerosis
phleb/o	Greek	vein	phlebitis
ven/o	Latin	vein	venous
hemat/o, hem/o	Greek	blood	hematology, hemolysis
sanguin/o	Latin	blood	sanguineous
thromb/o	Greek	clot	thrombosis

3. Respiratory System

Element	Origin	Meaning	Example
pneum/o, pneumon/o	Greek	lung; air	pneumonia, pneumonectomy
pulmon/o	Latin	lung	pulmonary
bronch/o	Greek	bronchial tube	bronchoscopy
trache/o	Greek	trachea	tracheotomy
laryng/o	Greek	larynx	laryngitis
pharyng/o	Greek	pharynx	pharyngitis
rhin/o	Greek	nose	rhinitis
nas/o	Latin	nose	nasal
pleur/o	Greek	pleura; side	pleuritis

4. Digestive System

Element	Origin	Meaning	Example
gastr/o	Greek	stomach	gastritis
enter/o	Greek	intestine	enteritis
intestin/o	Latin	intestine	intestinal
col/o, colon/o	Greek	colon	colonoscopy
hepat/o	Greek	liver	hepatitis
chol/e	Greek	bile; gall	cholelithiasis
bil/i	Latin	bile	biliary
proct/o	Greek	rectum and anus	proctology
rect/o	Latin	rectum	rectal
gloss/o	Greek	tongue	glossitis
lingu/o	Latin	tongue	sublingual
odont/o	Greek	tooth	orthodontics
dent/o	Latin	tooth	dental

5. Urinary System

Element	Origin	Meaning	Example
nephr/o	Greek	kidney	nephrology, nephritis
ren/o	Latin	kidney	renal
cyst/o	Greek	urinary bladder; sac	cystitis
vesic/o	Latin	bladder	vesical
ureter/o	Greek	ureter	ureteritis
urethr/o	Greek	urethra	urethritis
ur/o	Greek	urine; urinary tract	urology
urin/o	Latin	urine	urinalysis

6. Reproductive System

Element	Origin	Meaning	Example
gynec/o	Greek	woman; female	gynecology
andr/o	Greek	male	androgen
orch/o, orchi/o	Greek	testis	orchitis
test/o, testicul/o	Latin	testis	testicular
hyster/o, metr/o	Greek	uterus	hysterectomy, endometrium
uter/o	Latin	uterus	uterine
oophor/o	Greek	ovary	oophorectomy
ovari/o	Latin	ovary	ovarian
mast/o	Greek	breast	mastectomy
mamm/o	Latin	breast	mammogram
vagin/o	Latin	vagina	vaginal, vaginitis
prostat/o	Greek	prostate gland	prostatitis

7. Nervous System

Element	Origin	Meaning	Example
neur/o	Greek	nerve	neurology, neuropathy
encephal/o	Greek	brain	encephalitis
cerebr/o	Latin	cerebrum; brain	cerebral, cerebrovascular
cerebell/o	Latin	cerebellum	cerebellar
myel/o	Greek	spinal cord; bone marrow	myelopathy
mening/o	Greek	meninges	meningitis
psych/o	Greek	mind	psychology
esthesi/o	Greek	sensation; feeling	anesthesia

8. Musculoskeletal System

Element	Origin	Meaning	Example
oste/o	Greek	bone	osteoporosis
oss/e, oss/i	Latin	bone	osseous
arthr/o	Greek	joint	arthritis
articul/o	Latin	joint	articular
my/o	Greek	muscle	myopathy
muscul/o	Latin	muscle	muscular
chondr/o	Greek	cartilage	chondritis
spondyl/o	Greek	vertebra	spondylosis
vertebr/o	Latin	vertebra	vertebral
cost/o	Latin	rib	intercostal



9. Integumentary System

Element	Origin	Meaning	Example
derm/o, dermat/o	Greek	skin	dermatitis
cutane/o	Latin	skin	subcutaneous
trich/o	Greek	hair	trichology
pil/o	Latin	hair	piloerection
onych/o	Greek	nail	onychomycosis
ungu/o	Latin	nail	ungual
hidr/o	Greek	sweat	hyperhidrosis
sudor/o	Latin	sweat	sudoriferous

10. Endocrine & Lymphatic Systems

Element	Origin	Meaning	Example
aden/o	Greek	gland	adenoma
thyroid/o	Greek	thyroid gland	thyroidectomy
thym/o	Greek	thymus	thymoma
splen/o	Greek	spleen	splenomegaly
tonsill/o	Latin	tonsil	tonsillitis



11. Eye, Ear, Head & Neck

Element	Origin	Meaning	Example
ophthalm/o	Greek	eye	ophthalmology
ocul/o	Latin	eye	ocular
blephar/o	Greek	eyelid	blepharitis
ot/o	Greek	ear	otitis
aur/o, auricul/o	Latin	ear	auricular
cephal/o	Greek	head	cephalic
capit/o	Latin	head	decapitation
cervic/o	Latin	neck; cervix	cervical
gnath/o	Greek	jaw	prognathism
mandibul/o	Latin	mandible	mandibular
maxill/o	Latin	maxilla	maxillofacial

12. High-Yield Greek-Latin Pairs to Memorize

Body part / concept	Greek element	Latin element
Heart	cardi/o	cor-, cordi-
Blood vessel	angi/o	vas/o
Kidney	nephr/o	ren/o
Skin	derm/o, dermat/o	cutane/o
Eye	ophthalm/o	ocul/o
Lung	pneum/o, pneumon/o	pulmon/o
Bone	oste/o	oss/e, oss/i
Joint	arthr/o	articul/o
Muscle	my/o	muscul/o
Brain	encephal/o	cerebr/o
Nose	rhin/o	nas/o
Tongue	gloss/o	lingu/o
Tooth	odont/o	dent/o
Uterus	hyster/o, metr/o	uter/o
Ovary	oophor/o	ovari/o
Testis	orch/o, orchi/o	test/o, testicul/o
Breast	mast/o	mamm/o
Hair	trich/o	pil/o
Nail	onych/o	ungu/o
Rectum	proct/o	rect/o
Blood	hemat/o, hem/o	sanguin/o



13. Common Greek Suffixes Across Body Systems

Suffix	Meaning	Example
-logy	study of	cardiology
-logist	specialist in a field of study	neurologist
-itis	inflammation	dermatitis
-oma	tumor or mass	lymphoma
-osis	abnormal condition	cyanosis
-pathy	disease	neuropathy
-algia	pain	neuralgia
-megaly	enlargement	cardiomegaly
-scopy	visual examination	colonoscopy
-ectomy	surgical removal	nephrectomy
-otomy	incision into	tracheotomy
-stomy	creation of an opening	colostomy
-plasty	surgical repair	rhinoplasty

14. Latin Directional & Descriptive Elements

Element	Meaning	Example
anter/o	front	anterior
poster/o	back; behind	posterior
dors/o	back	dorsal
ventr/o	belly; front side	ventral
super/o	above	superior
infer/o	below	inferior
medi/o	middle	medial
later/o	side	lateral
proxim/o	nearest	proximal
dist/o	farthest	distal

BOTTOM LINE: Greek is especially common in diseases, specialties, and procedures; Latin is especially common in anatomy and physical description. Learn the paired roots because both forms appear throughout clinical language.

Study note: Origins shown are simplified for introductory medical terminology. Some elements entered English through more than one historical language pathway, and modern medical words may combine Greek and Latin elements.