

Common Medical Terms & Definitions

The following terms and definitions consist of some of the more common medical terms you are likely to encounter throughout your internship as you read various child welfare reports relating to your clients. Some of the following words you probably know, but some will probably be new to you. Please note that these definitions ARE NOT based on current DHR policy and SHOULD NOT be used as the basis for making major case decisions without referring to the definitions given by policy.

Abdominal Cavity

Located between the diaphragm and pelvis, the abdominal cavity is the space in the body that contains the abdominal organs, such as the stomach, small and large intestine, liver, and spleen. Damage to these organs can cause blood to accumulate within the abdominal cavity; this phenomenon is most commonly called internal organ damage.

Abscess

An inflamed, swollen area of skin where pus has built up due to the immune system's response to infection caused by injury.

Alcohol Affected Newborn

Exposure to alcohol while a fetus is still in utero can cause a delay in the development of the central nervous system, often leading to intellectual disabilities. Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) occurs when the exposure to alcohol overwhelms the fetus's capacity to develop normally and leads to a number of major disabilities and is characterized by facial features common to those with FASD.

Anterior

Medically speaking, the "front" of the body. Anterior can also refer to a structure/area on the body that is closer to the head than another structure/area.

Asphyxiate

To be deprived of oxygen to the point of unconsciousness or death. Asphyxiation can occur through any means of oxygen deprivation, including choking on food or another foreign object, carbon monoxide poisoning, via strangulation, etc. Oxygen deprivation quickly causes brain damage and death.

Burns

Burns are caused by exposure to intense heat or a substance that exceeds the capacity of the exposed tissue to maintain structural integrity. Exposure to many forms of heat can cause burning, including radiation (the sun), steam, hot water, hot metal, chemicals, electricity, etc. Burns have varying degrees of severity that are classified by the extent of the damage to the underlying tissue layers.

1st Degree Burn

Least severe burn, which is limited to the epidermis.

2nd Degree Burn

Moderately severe burn that has damaged the epidermis and progressed into the dermis.

3rd Degree Burn

A very severe burn which involves the underlying subcutaneous tissue (fat layer), and can extend in to muscle tissue. 3rd degree burns also result in the loss of fluids and electrolytes, and can be life threatening.

Clavicle

What is termed the “collarbone” is composed of two clavicles on either side of the neck.

Compartment Syndrome

Muscle groups or groups of organs are surrounded by connective tissue creating a “compartment.” When those muscles or organs are damaged, they swell and pressure builds within the surrounding compartment. If the damaged body part swells so much that the resulting pressure restricts the flow of blood, the group of muscles or organs within the compartment lose the flow of oxygen-rich blood causing further damage to the area. Compartment syndrome is considered a medical emergency, and a medical professional to prevent muscle or organ death must relieve the pressure as soon as possible.

Concussion

A concussion occurs when there is trauma to the head, commonly from falling, or slamming in to something solid. The human brain, situated inside the skull, floats in a liquid substance called cerebrospinal fluid. When the head hits something hard enough or at fast enough speeds, the soft, gelatinous brain, which moves at a different rate than the rest of the body (because of its weight, consistency, and buoyancy), is subject to unusual forces of acceleration. These forces and pressures can cause “axonal shearing,” where the connections between neurons are literally ripped apart in some places. Damage to the brain can also occur if it hits the inside of the skull. The severity of concussions can vary a great deal, although medical scientists are learning that any concussion, regardless of severity, can have unforeseen negative consequences, even years in the future. Concussions are sometimes considered “mild” Traumatic Brain Injuries, and a medical professional should examine any person with a suspected concussion.

Contusion

Essentially, a contusion is the medical term for a bruise. When a trauma damages the capillaries and veins in an area, blood can seep from the site of the injury into the surrounding tissue. This dispersed blood is what causes the discoloration seen under the skin, and the changing colors of a contusion reveal the injury is healing as the seeped blood is reabsorbed by the immune system. Historically, medical professionals would attempt to determine how long ago an injury occurred by the colors of a bruise; believing that some bruise colors indicated an older injury that other colors. However, newer research indicates that using the color of a bruise to establish the age of an injury is quite inexact and color should never be the sole criterion in determining the age of a bruise.

Coroner

A medical professional responsible for identifying the cause of unknown deaths.

Dermis

Layer of skin located beneath the epidermis, this layer contains hair follicles, pigment cells, oil and sweat glands, and sensory nerves.

Diaphysis

A diaphysis is the shaft, or middle portion, of a long bone, such as the femur. Often the diaphysis of the bone is where fractures occur.

Digits

(Or digital) refers to the fingers or toes. Humans have 5 digits per hand and per foot.

Dislocation

A separation of two adjacent bony structures that form a joint, such as the shoulder or hip. For example, we say someone has dislocated his or her shoulder when the humerus (arm bone) slips out of the scapula (shoulder blade).

Distal

Distal is a medical term to describe the relative location of one structure in relation to another. Distal structures are further away in relative location to another part of the body. For example, my hand is distal from my shoulder, or my foot is distal from my knee.

Drug Affected Newborn

When a fetus is exposed to a drug in utero and there is resulting damage to the developing organs or changes in normal physiology. For example, methamphetamine use during pregnancy can cause low birthweight and neurodevelopmental problems in the fetus, and exposure to heroin can cause withdrawal symptoms in newborns who are cut off from the drugs their bodies became dependent upon prior to birth.

Edema

The accumulation of fluid within soft tissue may or may not involve inflammation.

Epidermis

The top layer of skin that contains dead skin cells and keratin.

Epiphysis

The epiphysis is the end of a long bone. This portion of the bone is connected to the diaphysis portion of the bone and forms joints with adjacent bones.

Factitious Disorder by Proxy

Factitious disorder is a condition in which an individual feigns illness, or takes deliberate steps to make themselves ill because they have a psychological need to be a medical patient. For example, a person with this disorder may ingest enough poison to become ill but not enough poison to kill themselves. Loosely defined, "proxy" means to act on another's behalf, and Factitious Disorder by Proxy, occurs

when the individual takes deliberate steps to make someone under their care ill. Also called Munchausen's and Munchausen's by proxy, this disorder is a very serious mental illness.

Failure to Thrive

When the basic needs of a developing child are not met and result in a regression or delay in development which can be physical or mental in nature. For example, a child who is not fed enough calories will be delayed on growth and weight curves, or a child that is not socially engaged will result in delay of proper speech or intellectual development.

Fracture

The medical term for a broken bone. Fractures are defined by the degree of severity and can range from hairline fractures with the bone being broken but not out of place, to a compound fracture with the bone snapped and the fragmented bone pieces sticking out of the skin.

Inconsistent Fracture

A fracture that is not consistent with the reported cause of injury. For example, a fracture from a fall will appear different compared to a fracture caused by being hit with an object.

Spiral Fracture

A fracture line that is slanted or on an angle relative to the shaft of a bone, a diagonal fracture (also called an oblique fracture).

Transverse Fracture

A fracture line that is perpendicular to the shaft of the bone.

Frenulum

A small bit of tissue whose function is to hold another body part in place. For instance, the lingual frenulum under the tongue guides the fetal development of the tongue and later holds the tongue in place in the mouth. There are multiple frenula on the human body, including several in the mouth and one on female and uncircumcised male genitalia. Frenula are not frequently injured in everyday life, however, because these membranous tissues are so delicate they can be torn, sometimes due to physical or sexual abuse.

Granulation Tissue

A thick formation of blood vessels at a site of healing. When the body is injured, new blood vessels grow to transport increased blood to the area to enable the healing process. After the injury has healed, granulation tissue may still be present for some time as the body gradually breaks down and re-absorbs the blood vessels that are no longer needed at that site. Granulation tissue can last months at the site of a healed injury.

Hematoma

A hematoma can be thought of as a pocket of blood between layers of soft tissue that usually forms in response to a blunt trauma. A bruise is also identified as an injury where blood causes discoloration under the skin, but the blood in a bruise is dispersed between and within layers of tissue while the blood in a hematoma is literally pooled together in between layers. Hypothetically, the blood in a hematoma

could be drained because it is coagulated together, whereas a bruise could not be drained because it is dispersed throughout the tissue in the area. Because the body does not reabsorb the blood of a hematoma as it does with the blood of a bruise, treatment is often needed to resolve the injury.

Subdural Hematoma

A hematoma that has formed beneath the skull.

Hemorrhage

Uncontrolled bleeding

Internal Injuries

Damage to structures within compartments of the body, such as within the abdominal cavity or chest cavity.

Intracranial

Occurring within the skull or cranium.

Ischemic

Restriction of blood flow to an area of the body, causing injury to the restricted body part(s).

Ligament

Connective tissue that holds adjacent bones together.

Ligature Marks

Marks made by a cord, rope, or material that was used for tying or binding a part of the body. Ligature marks can occur around the wrists or ankles if a person has been tied up or around the neck when a person has been strangled.

Malnourished

Lacking basic nutrients or minerals in the diet, resulting in physiological dysfunction. For example, a lack of calcium in the diet will result in weak bones that fracture easily.

Metaphysis

Area of the bone where new growth occurs, right before the epiphysis, or end, of a long bone. In children, the metaphysis is a common area for fractures to occur.

Noxious

Noxious is another word for “poisonous” or “toxic.” Therefore, a “noxious substance” is one that is detrimental to human health in some way. This would include the obvious, such as rat poison, and the less obvious, such as smoke from a fire if there is a lack of ventilation.

Palate

Roof of the mouth.

Pallor

A pale appearance, usually indicating a loss or decrease in blood flow.

Posterior

Medical term to describe the back of something or when one structure is located behind another structure. For example, my heart is located posterior to my breastbone.

Proximal

Medical term to describe the relative location of one structure in relation to another. Proximal structures are closer to the main body (or torso) than distal structures. Therefore, my elbow is the more proximal and my hand is the more distal of the two body structures.

Respiration

The process of breathing. If someone has “ceased respiration”, they have stopped breathing and will shortly die without medical intervention.

Scapula

A medical term for the shoulder blade; a flat bone located on the back that serves as the connection point for the arm to the body.

Shaken Baby Syndrome

A type of whiplash injury that occurs when an infant or young child is shaken rapidly. The force of the shaking results in the same axonal sheering that causes a concussion. Shaken baby Syndrome is often associated with bleeding in the brain or eyes. Infants need not be shaken back and forth multiple times to sustain damage to their brains. If rough enough, a single shake (often in a moment of frustration) is enough to harm an infant because they lack the strength to support and control their heads.

Sprain

A sprain occurs when a ligament or tendon is stretched past its capacity. Sprains often occur in the ankles or wrists.

Sternum

The breastbone, a flat bone where ribs connect in the front of the chest, overlying the heart.

Subluxation

When a bone fractures, or dislocates and one section of the affected bone slides under another section of the affected bone, or under another adjacent bone.

Systemic

Something that occurs body-wide, or to the whole system. For example, poison often spreads to multiple organ systems in the body causing systemic damage.

Tear

When a structure, such as a ligament or tendon, is stretched past its capacity, causing a break in the connective tissues. An example of this type of injury is a torn ligament.

Tendon

Connective tissue that holds muscles to bones. For instance, the Achilles tendon holds the calf muscle to the heel of the foot.

Thoracic Cavity

A cavity of the body located below the neck and above the diaphragm containing the lungs, heart, and many major blood vessels.

Welt

A red and swollen mark on the skin left by impact or pressure.

Whiplash

When an impact causes abrupt changes in direction of an affected body part, such as the neck, and causes damage to connective tissue, muscles, or nerves.

Wounds

An injury to body tissue that is usually associated with broken skin. There are several types of wounds

Abrasion

Sometimes called a scrape, an abrasion occurs when friction against the skin causes damage that is limited to the epidermis, and minimal, if any, bleeding occurs. Abrasions are less serious than a laceration although these injuries can range from first-degree (superficial) to third degree (greater skin damage) in severity.

Incision

A wound that is caused by a “clean” cut through tissue, such as when skin is accidentally cut with scissors.

Laceration

A wound that lacks the “clean” edges of an incision, and is instead ragged as if torn open. Lacerations are typically the result of a blunt trauma.

Puncture

An injury occurring when an object penetrates the body and damages deep structures, creating a hole.