Anatomical Directional Terms With Examples

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TERM	DEFINITION
Anatomical position	The standard reference posture: standing upright, feet parallel, arms at the sides, palms facing forward. All directional terms assume it, even if the patient is lying down.
Superior	Above, or toward the head. Opposite of inferior. The orbits are superior to the mouth.
Inferior	Below, or toward the feet. Opposite of superior. The pelvis is inferior to the abdomen.
Anterior	Toward the front of the body. Opposite of posterior. The kneecap is on the anterior side of the leg.
Posterior	Toward the back of the body. Opposite of anterior. The spine is posterior to the stomach.
Medial	Toward the midline of the body. Opposite of lateral. The nose is medial to the ears.
Lateral	Away from the midline, toward the side. Opposite of medial. The thumb is lateral to the other fingers in the anatomical position.
Proximal	In a limb, closer to the trunk or the point of attachment. Opposite of distal. The humerus is proximal to the radius and ulna.
Distal	In a limb, farther from the trunk or the point of attachment. Opposite of proximal. The wrist is distal to the elbow.

TERM	DEFINITION
Superficial	Closer to the surface of the body. Opposite of deep. The skin is superficial to the bones.
Deep	Farther from the surface of the body. Opposite of superficial. The brain is deep to the skull.
Cranial	Toward the head; also called cephalic. In a human in anatomical position, it means the same as superior. The skull is cranial to the neck.
Caudal	Toward the tail, so toward the tailbone in a human. In a human, it means the same as inferior. The sacrum is caudal to the lumbar vertebrae.
Ventral	Toward the belly. In a human it matches anterior; in a four-legged animal it is the underside. The navel is on the ventral side of the trunk.
Dorsal	Toward the back. In a human it matches posterior; in a four-legged animal it is the upper side. The shoulder blades are on the dorsal side of the trunk.
Ipsilateral	On the same side of the body as another structure. The right hand and the right foot are ipsilateral.
Contralateral	On the opposite side of the body from another structure. The right hand and the left foot are contralateral.
Bilateral	On both sides of the body. Bilateral swelling of the ankles affects the left and the right ankle.
Palmar	Toward the palm of the hand, the front surface of the hand. The fingerprints are on the palmar side of the fingertips.
Plantar	Toward the sole of the foot. The heel pad lies on the plantar side of the foot.

TERM	DEFINITION
Supine	Lying on the back, face up. Opposite of prone. A patient lying face up on an exam table is supine.
Prone	Lying on the stomach, face down. Opposite of supine. A patient lies prone to be examined on the back.
Sagittal plane	A vertical plane that divides the body into right and left parts. A midsagittal (median) cut runs through the exact midline; a parasagittal cut makes unequal parts.
Frontal plane	A vertical plane that divides the body into anterior (front) and posterior (back) parts. Also called the coronal plane. It separates the face from the back of the head.
Transverse plane	A horizontal plane that divides the body into superior (upper) and inferior (lower) parts, giving cross sections. A CT slice through the abdomen is a transverse section.