

Word for Word

When should you use *case* and when should you use *patient*?



Deciding when to use the word *patient* and when to use the word *case* is an exercise in patience and careful consideration.

Patient and *case* often appear in similar contexts in biomedical and clinical reports. Both words often are used when describing the characteristics, effects, or outcomes of a disease. But these two words—although they are similar in meaning—cannot be used interchangeably.

The noun *patient* refers to someone who is awaiting or undergoing medical care or treatment.¹ It is typically accompanied by verbs such as *examine*, *diagnose*, and *treat*.²

Examples

A 34-year-old patient was diagnosed with leukemia.
A total of 12 patients were treated in our clinical trial.

In biomedical writing, the noun *case* refers to a specific instance of disease or injury.³ It is typically used with verbs such as *evaluate*, *document*, and *report*.² Using the word *case* to refer to people can be dehumanizing, so it is best to avoid using it in that way; instead, the noun *patient* is a better choice.²

Examples

The physician documented that the patient had a severe case of pneumonia.

Over 250,000 new cases of breast cancer were reported in 2021.

But not

The 65-year-old case underwent chemotherapy.

References

1. "Patient." Merriam-Webster. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/patient> Accessed June 2, 2022.
2. *AMA Manual of Style*, 11th ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press; 2020. Chapter 11.1. <https://www.amamanualofstyle.com> Accessed June 3, 2022.
3. "Case." Merriam Webster. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/case> Accessed June 3, 2022.

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