Today, we discuss important differences for seniors when using the words, “prone” and “supine,” two words that often confuse us when it’s vitally important to distinguish between them, because they’re antonyms. We might even get into a few synonyms of each word. Are you excited? Good.

Let’s say that you are driving along the highway, and you notice flashing lights behind you, and pretty soon, you also hear a loud siren, and then, my goodness, a police car is right beside you, and the officer is vigorously waving you over to the side of the road, so you immediately swerve over on to the narrow dirt shoulder just off the road and park your car and wait, wondering what’s going on. Did I win a prize? The police officer draws his gun, points it straight at you, and curtly says, “Lie down prone on the road. Now!”

What do you do? If this guy is a Dirty Harry type, he might even say, “Do you feel lucky, chum? Do you want to take a 50/50 chance on being right? Do you? Well, make my day!” I use this illustration to emphasize the importance of knowing the difference between prone and supine and also because I just watched Clint Eastwood play the part of Dirty Harry and shoot up the entire US of A. Well, all the bad guys.

Let’s look at another more common scenario. Your doctor is conducting your annual medical examination, and everything seems to be going well with your blood pressure and lungs and such and he tells you to lie supine on his padded bench. Does this mean you will soon experience the dreaded prostate probe or not? Do you feel lucky? Oops, sorry; I really like Dirty Harry.

You can see from above that it’s vital to know the difference between prone and supine. Prone is derived from the Latin term “pronus,” which means “inclined to,” and it is commonly used to mean “lying face down.” When you pronate something, you bend it forward.

By the way, “prostrate,” (not the exam) is a synonym for prone, but usually means not only flat but stretched out which might be a good pose for the policeman on steroids above.

The opposite of prone is “supine,” derived from the Latin word “supinus,” meaning “thrown or turned backward,” and it describes someone who is lying on one’s back, the same position that causes you to snore, so when your wife asks, “Fred are you sleeping prone or supine?” you should answer prone.

When I was taking a kinesiology course a hundred years ago at McMaster, they always used the terms pronation and supination in anatomical context to refer to the position of limbs, especially when we examined sports medicine and the placement of the foot while running.

Given what we have covered thus far, most seniors now know how to handle pesky doctors and policemen as well as a complaining spouse in bed at night. You might even like to flaunt your knowledge when you encounter friends. You might say, “Larry, I’m doing a survey, how do you sleep at night?” And Larry might reply, “Not well because my wife snores.” So you have to include the key words in your question.

I think you are now ready for two nautical terms similar to prone and supine. They are dorsal and ventral; dorsal refers to the back, and ventral refers to the abdomen. Don’t ask Larry if he has a dorsal fin. That will cause trouble.
There are various rhyming and imagery tricks to remember these words. When I think of dorsal, I imagine a porpoise cruising through the water, its dorsal fin on display. Supine rhymes with spine, which is in fact, in contact with the floor or ground when you are supine. And prone rhymes with groan which occurs whenever the doctor is… but maybe we should stop there.