Anatomical movements usually involve bones or body parts moving around fixed joints relative to the main anatomical axes (sagittal, coronal, frontal, etc.) or planes parallel to them.

Anatomical terms of movement are used to describe the actions of muscles upon the skeleton. Muscles contract to produce movement at joints, and the subsequent movements can be precisely described using this terminology.

The terms used assume that the body begins in the anatomical position. Most movements have an opposite movement – also known as an antagonistic movement. We have described the terms in antagonistic pairs for ease of understanding.

* **Flexion and extension** are movements that occur in the sagittal plane. They refer to increasing and decreasing the angle between two body parts:

**Flexion** refers to a movement that decreases the angle between two body parts. Flexion at the elbow is decreasing the angle between the ulna and the humerus. When the knee flexes, the ankle moves closer to the buttock, and the angle between the femur and tibia gets smaller.

**Extension** refers to a movement that increases the angle between two body parts. Extension at the elbow is increasing the angle between the ulna and the humerus. Extension of the knee straightens the lower limb.

* **Abduction and adduction** are two terms that are used to describe movements towards or away from the midline of the body.

**Abduction** is a movement away from the midline – just as abducting someone is to take them away. For example, abduction of the shoulder raises the arms out to the sides of the body.

**Adduction** is a movement towards the midline. Adduction of the hip squeezes the legs together.

In fingers and toes, the midline used is not the midline of the body, but of the hand and foot respectively. Therefore, abducting the fingers spreads them out.