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de·cay  (dĭ-kā)

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v. **de·cayed**, **de·cay·ing**, **de·cays**

v.intr.

1. *Biology* To break down into component parts; rot.
2. *Physics* To disintegrate in a process of radioactive decay or particle decay.
3. *Electronics* To decrease gradually in magnitude. Used of voltage or current.
4. *Aerospace* To decrease in orbit. Used of an artificial satellite.
5. To fall into ruin: *a civilization that had begun to decay*.
6. To decline in health or vigor; waste away.
7. To decline from a state of normality, excellence, or prosperity; deteriorate.

v.tr.

To cause to decay.

n.

1.
 - a. The destruction or decomposition of organic matter as a result of bacterial or fungal action; rot.
 - b. Rotted matter.
2. *Physics*
 - a. See [radioactive decay](#).
 - b. See [particle decay](#).
3. *Aerospace* The decrease in orbital altitude of an artificial satellite as a result of conditions such as atmospheric drag.
4. A gradual deterioration to an inferior state: *tooth decay*; *urban decay*.
5. A falling into ruin.

[Middle English *decayen*, from Old French *decair*, from Vulgar Latin **dēcadere* : Latin *dē-*, *de-* + Latin *cadere*, to fall; see **kad-** [in the Appendix of Indo-European roots](#).]

de·cay er n.

Synonyms: decay, rot, decompose, putrefy, spoil, molder, disintegrate

These verbs refer to the gradual process by which something breaks down or falls apart as a result of natural causes. *Decay* has wide application but often suggests partial deterioration short of complete destruction: "A *decaying dam* is an accident waiting to happen" (George Black).

Rot and *decompose* are closely synonymous with *decay*, but *rot* often emphasizes loss of structural integrity while *decompose* generally stresses breaking down into chemical components: *The rotting timbers gave way under the added weight. When grass clippings decompose, they return nutrients to the soil.*

Putrefy denotes an advanced stage of organic breakdown that is offensive to the senses: "Large numbers of cows and oxen ... were left to *putrefy* on mud flats after the floods receded, attracting rats" (John F. Burns).

Spoil usually refers to the process by which perishable substances become unfit for use or consumption: *Fish will spoil quickly if not refrigerated.*

To *molder* is to crumble to dust: *The shawl had moldered away in the trunk.*

Disintegrate refers to the reduction of something to particles, fragments, or constituent elements: *The sandstone façade had disintegrated from exposure to wind and rain.*

Indo-European & Semitic Roots Appendices

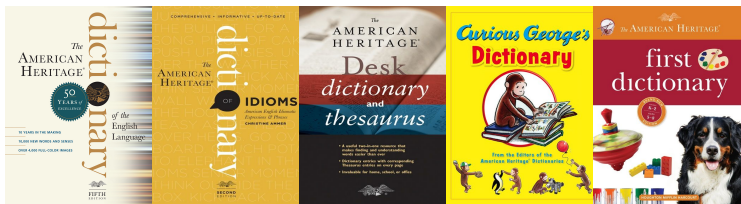
Thousands of entries in the dictionary include etymologies that trace their origins back to reconstructed proto-languages. You can obtain more information about these forms in our online appendices:

[Indo-European Roots](#)

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The Indo-European appendix covers nearly half of the Indo-European roots that have left their mark on English words. A more complete treatment of Indo-European roots and the English words derived from them is available in our [Dictionary of Indo-European Roots](#).

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