Why search the literature?
- To identify completed as well as ongoing research, relevant to your topic
- To prevent duplication
- To avoid the pitfalls and errors of previous research
- To find gaps in existing research

Clinical Question:
Is cranberry juice effective in reducing the symptoms of urinary tract infections in women?

The key to a good literature search is to formulate your search topic into an answerable question.

“A well built clinical question contains 3 or 4 elements” (Sackett, 2000):
- Population/Patient: women with urinary tract infections
- Intervention/Indicator: cranberry juice
- Comparator/Control: placebo
- Outcome: reduction in symptoms

This is referred to as the PICO approach or principle. Not all research questions are about interventions, and other types of questions are to do with aetiology and risk factors, frequency, diagnosis, prognosis and prediction, phenomena. The PICO approach can be used in all the above types of questions.

Select a Resource
There are literally millions of published reports, journal articles and studies available in the biomedical fields. Choosing the best resource to search for up-to-date best evidence is an important decision.

There are two main biomedical databases available which provide references to journal articles - Medline and Embase.
Medline

Produced by the US National Library of Medicine. It contains over 12.2 million records and indexes over 4,600 journals from over 70 countries. It's coverage spans from 1950 to the present. Articles are indexed within 6 months of publication.

About 85% of the articles indexed are English language content. It uses MeSH (Medical Subject Headings) thesaurus, with over 22,000 main concepts.

Medline has an international coverage – with main focus on articles from United States and Eastern Europe.

Embase

Produced by Elsevier, Embase has almost 9.5 million records from over 4,600 journals from 70 countries. It's coverage spans from 1974 to the present.

Articles are indexed within 2 weeks of being published and 90% of references are English language content.

It uses EMTREE Life Science Thesaurus – with over 48,000 drug and medical index terms.

Embase has an international coverage – focus on Western Europe and USA.

Search Strategy

Start your search by planning which keywords define your search topic. Think around your subject and write down all possible terms. Consider synonyms, e.g. cancer and neoplasm, alternative spellings, e.g. paediatrics and pediatrics. Broaden your search terms to ensure a more general result should your search yield too few results, e.g. labour rather than labour stages.

Searching the databases

Enter each term or phrase separately so that you can build up a systematic search using the appropriate search terms. You can use controlled vocabulary or free text when searching for terms. Controlled vocabulary searching usually gives a more precise search, as the terms used to index the article have been assigned by someone looking at the subject content of that article. e.g. the controlled vocabulary term for cranberry juice on Medline is Vaccinium macrocarpon. This will result in retrieving all references which have been assigned that MESH term. (Medical Subject Heading).

Free text searching looks for the occurrence of a specific word/phrase usually within the title or abstract of an article. The word/phrase needs only to have been mentioned to be picked up by the search, therefore the actual content of the article itself may not be relevant. e.g. cranberry juice as free text will only pick up references where this phrase appears.

Combining Searches

Keywords can be combined to include or exclude terms, to narrow or widen a search using Boolean operators.

The main Boolean operators are:

AND both topics must be included, e.g. aspirin and pain

OR either or both topics must be included, e.g. health promotion or patient education

NOT the first topic must be included but not the second, e.g. nutrition not diet.

Limit your search

Databases often allow you to apply limits to the search you are performing. This enables you to be very specific in the type of references retrieved, which is vital when you have found too many references!

Most databases allow you to limit to language, year and publication type, e.g. Randomised Controlled Trials, s, reviews etc. Some also allow you to limit by human, gender, latest update etc.

Evaluate and Review

Evaluate the material you have found to ensure it is relevant to your topic. You may need to obtain copies of some articles from other libraries. Allow sufficient time for the articles to be requested and supplied to you.

Remember to keep the printouts of all the search results for your reference lists at the end of your assignments.

Further Information


Nia Morris is Training Librarian at the John Spalding Library, Medical Institute, Maelor Hospital, Wrexham, North Wales NHS Trust (Eastern Area).

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Contact: medicaleducation@cardiff.ac.uk

Series Editor: Dr Lesley Pugsley, Medical Education, School of Postgraduate Medical and Dental Education, Cardiff University.