

# Searching PubMed – top tips

5 top tips to make your searching of PubMed more efficient.

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# 1 Too many hits? How to narrow down the search

## 1.1 Use MeSH only

- Why?

There will be significant reduction in the number of hits if you search using MeSH only: eg

[Search](#) or [Add to history](#)

History		<a href="#">Download history</a> <a href="#">Clear history</a>	
Search	Add to builder	Query	Items found
#7	<a href="#">Add</a>	Search quality of healthcare	6490292
#6	<a href="#">Add</a>	Search "Quality of Health Care"[Mesh]	6411801

Rather than looking for the keyword text in title or abstract, Pubmed will only look for papers that have been tagged as being about the right subject.

You may only need to do this with one part of your search strategy.

- Why not?

There's always a downside – newer papers haven't had MeSH added yet, so you might miss most recent publications on the topic.

- How?

Type your keyword in the pubmed search box, then select MeSH from the dropdown menu.

The screenshot shows the MeSH search interface on the NCBI website. The search box contains the text "care quality" and the dropdown menu is set to "MeSH". The search results show three items, with the first one selected. The PubMed Search Builder on the right shows the search query: "Quality of Health Care"[Mesh].

Hopefully there'll be a match, but you might need to adjust your language to get a good fit.

Check the definition, tick the box, and “add to search builder”.

Finally “search pubmed” which will add the MeSH to the advanced search to combine with other terms.

## 1.2 Still too many? Use MeSH Major headings

- Why?

Major headings are MeSH terms that are the main theme or topic of the paper.

- Why not?

There are only 2 or 3 Major MeSH per paper, so you might miss relevant papers. You can see the significant different in numbers of hits.

### History

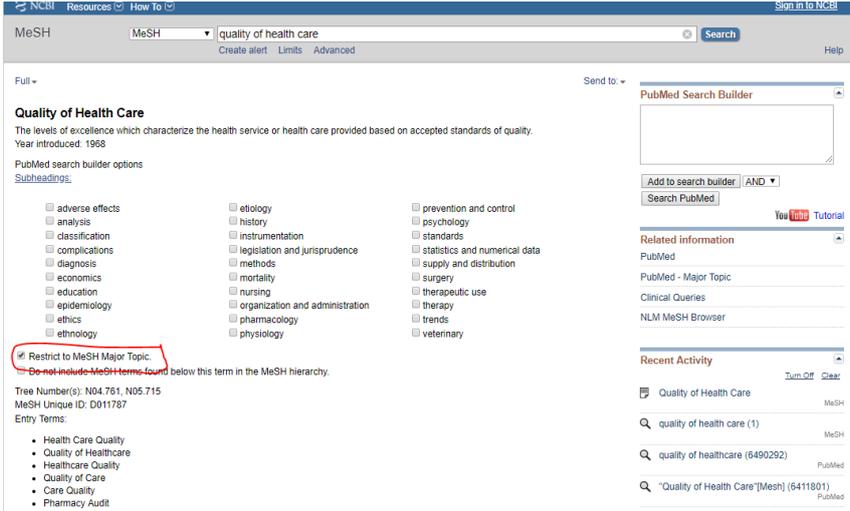
[Download history](#) [Clear history](#)

Search	Add to builder	Query	Items found	Time
#9	<a href="#">Add</a>	Search "Quality of Health Care"[Majr]	<a href="#">821261</a>	12:06:56
#7	<a href="#">Add</a>	Search quality of healthcare	<a href="#">6490292</a>	11:44:03
#6	<a href="#">Add</a>	Search "Quality of Health Care"[Mesh]	<a href="#">6411801</a>	11:43:49

- How?

Search for your MeSH as above, and click on the term when you find it.

The detail for the individual MeSH will give the option to “restrict to MeSH Major Topic”. Select this, “add to search builder”, and “search Pubmed”.



MeSH   [Create alert](#) [Limits](#) [Advanced](#) [Help](#)

Full - Send to - PubMed Search Builder

**Quality of Health Care**  
The levels of excellence which characterize the health service or health care provided based on accepted standards of quality.  
Year introduced: 1968

PubMed search builder options  
[Subheadings:](#)

<input type="checkbox"/> adverse effects	<input type="checkbox"/> etiology	<input type="checkbox"/> prevention and control
<input type="checkbox"/> analysis	<input type="checkbox"/> history	<input type="checkbox"/> psychology
<input type="checkbox"/> classification	<input type="checkbox"/> instrumentation	<input type="checkbox"/> standards
<input type="checkbox"/> complications	<input type="checkbox"/> legislation and jurisprudence	<input type="checkbox"/> statistics and numerical data
<input type="checkbox"/> diagnosis	<input type="checkbox"/> methods	<input type="checkbox"/> supply and distribution
<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> mortality	<input type="checkbox"/> surgery
<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> nursing	<input type="checkbox"/> therapeutic use
<input type="checkbox"/> epidemiology	<input type="checkbox"/> organization and administration	<input type="checkbox"/> therapy
<input type="checkbox"/> ethics	<input type="checkbox"/> pharmacology	<input type="checkbox"/> trends
<input type="checkbox"/> ethnology	<input type="checkbox"/> physiology	<input type="checkbox"/> veterinary

**Restrict to MeSH Major Topic.**  
~~Do not include MeSH terms found below this term in the MeSH hierarchy.~~

Tree Number(s): N04.761, N05.715  
MeSH Unique ID: D011787  
Entry Terms:  

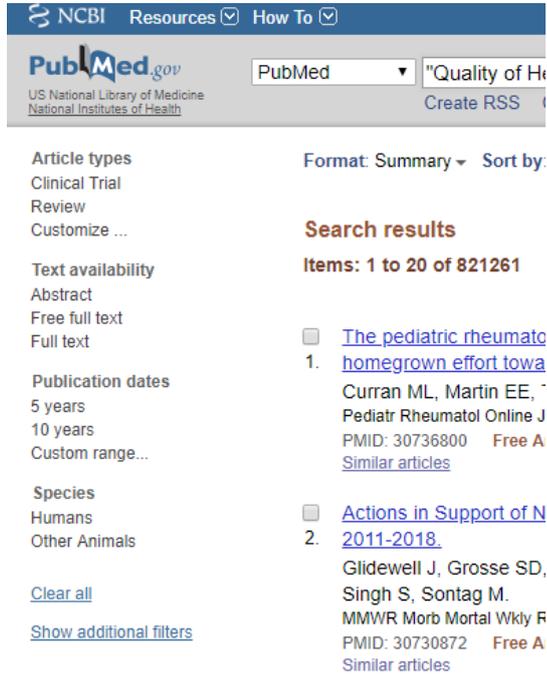
- Health Care Quality
- Quality of Healthcare
- Healthcare Quality
- Quality of Care
- Care Quality
- Pharmacy Audit

Related information  
PubMed  
PubMed - Major Topic  
Clinical Queries  
NLM MeSH Browser

Recent Activity [Turn Off](#) [Clear](#)

- Quality of Health Care MeSH
- quality of health care (1) MeSH
- quality of healthcare (6490292) PubMed
- "Quality of Health Care"[Mesh] (6411801) PubMed

## 1.3 Narrow by publication year, or research methodology



The screenshot shows the PubMed interface. At the top, there are navigation links for 'NCBI Resources' and 'How To'. Below that, the 'PubMed.gov' logo is displayed, along with the text 'US National Library of Medicine' and 'National Institutes of Health'. A search bar contains the text 'PubMed' and a dropdown menu is set to 'Quality of Health Care'. To the right of the search bar, there is a 'Create RSS' link. On the left side, there are several filter categories: 'Article types' (Clinical Trial, Review, Customize...), 'Text availability' (Abstract, Free full text, Full text), 'Publication dates' (5 years, 10 years, Custom range...), and 'Species' (Humans, Other Animals). Below these filters are links for 'Clear all' and 'Show additional filters'. On the right side, the 'Search results' section shows 'Items: 1 to 20 of 821261'. Two results are listed: 1. 'The pediatric rheumatology homegrown effort toward...' by Curran ML, Martin EE, et al. (PMID: 30736800, Free Full Text, Similar articles). 2. 'Actions in Support of National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society...' by Glidewell J, Grosse SD, Singh S, Sontag M. (MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep, PMID: 30730872, Free Full Text, Similar articles).

- Why?

The research methodology might be a key way of prioritising your reading. Why not start by reading the reviews on a topic?

- Why not?

Often limiting by publication year won't help much because rates of publication are increasing exponentially, so only including the last 5 or 10 years often doesn't reduce the number of hits

The "human" limit is only useful if you want to distinguish between animal and human studies – the human keyword isn't generally added to care quality papers, so limiting to only those papers where it *has* been added will skew the results.

- How?

Use the options down the left-hand menu of PubMed to narrow by various criteria:

Click "customise", add the options you want and "show". Click those option to apply them to your search.

Article types Format: Summary Sort by: Most Re

- Clinical Trial
- Review
- Customize ...

- Text availabil
- Abstract
- Free full text
- Full text

- Publication d
- 5 years
- 10 years
- Custom range

- Species
- Humans
- Other Animals

[Clear all](#)

[Show addition](#)

Article types

- Randomized Controlled Trial
- Research Support, American Recovery and Reinvestment Act
- Research Support, N.I.H., Extramural
- Research Support, N.I.H., Intramural
- Research Support, Non-U.S. Gov't
- Research Support, U.S. Gov't, Non-P.H.S.
- Research Support, U.S. Gov't, P.H.S.
- Research Support, U.S. Government
- Retracted Publication
- Retraction of Publication
- Review
- Scientific Integrity Review
- Systematic Reviews
- Technical Report
- Twin Study
- Validation Studies
- Video-Audio Media
- Webcasts

[Show](#)

Velasco M, Ferrer M, Ballesteros

clear Article types Format: Summary Sort by: Most Recent Per page: 20

- Clinical Trial
- Meta-Analysis
- Review
- Systematic Reviews
- Customize ...

- Text availability
- Abstract
- Free full text
- Full text

- Publication dates
- 5 years
- 10 years
- Custom range...

Species

**Search results**

Items: 1 to 20 of 9216

<< First < Prev Page 1 of 461 Next > Last >>

**Filters activated: Systematic Reviews. [Clear all](#) to show 821261 items.**

1. [Structural, institutional and organizational factors associated with successful pay for performance programmes in improving quality of maternal and child health care in low and middle income countries: a systematic literature review.](#)  
Patel S.  
J Glob Health. 2018 Dec;8(2):021001. doi: 10.7189/jogh.08.021001.  
PMID: 30675337 Free PMC Article  
[Similar articles](#)

Send to Filters: [Manage Filters](#)

Sort by: [Best match](#)

Results by year

## 2 Too few hits? How to broaden your search

- How?

Consider some combination of the following:

- adding additional synonyms  
e.g. if your topic is *cancer*, try including *cancer OR neoplasm OR tumour OR tumor*
- reducing the number of search “blocks”  
e.g. if yours is a 4 or 5 part question, consider how you could reduce it to a 3 part question

what is the influence of weekend staffing on patient satisfaction with maternity care in the UK ?

try only searching for

what is the influence of weekend staffing on patient satisfaction with maternity care in the UK ?

- consider a different database  
Maybe Pubmed just does not hold the information you need.

## 3 Setting up alerts

- Why?

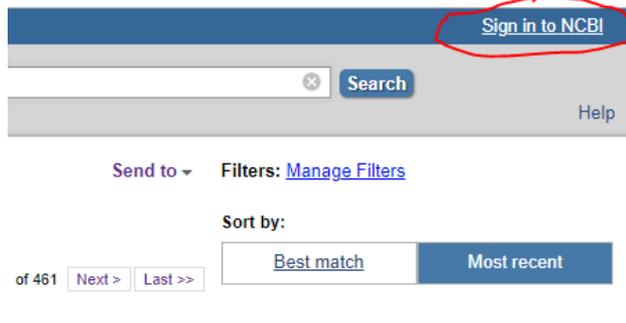
Get efficient at receiving new papers on your topic, by your favourite author, from key journals – set up an alert.

- Why not?

If you don't find them useful, and/or when the need for them ends, just turn off via MyNCBI.

- How?

You'll need to either use an RSS reader (there's one built into Outlook), or set up an account with NCBI



The screenshot shows the NCBI search results page. At the top right, there is a blue button labeled "Sign in to NCBI" which is circled in red. Below the search bar, there is a "Search" button. Further down, there are options for "Send to" and "Filters: Manage Filters". The "Sort by:" section shows two buttons: "Best match" and "Most recent". At the bottom left, it says "of 461" with "Next >" and "Last >>" buttons.

Create your search, then click “create alert”

How To 

PubMed  "Quality of Health Care"[Majr]

Create RSS **Create alert** Advanced

Format: Summary  Sort by: Most Recent  Per page: 20 

### Search results

Items: 1 to 20 of 9216

<< First < Prev Page **1**

There's an option to create an alert in advanced search as well.

History [Download history](#) 

Search	Add to builder	Query	Items found
#10	Add	Search "Quality of Health Care"[Majr] Filters: Systematic Reviews	9216
#9	AND in builder	Quality of Health Care"[Majr]	821261
#7	OR in builder	Quality of healthcare	6490292
#6	NOT in builder	Quality of Health Care"[Mesh]	6411801

31 > Literature

Save in My NCBI 

Sign in, and then adjust the settings as you prefer.

## 4 Get the full text: Use Cambridge PubMed

<http://tinyurl.com/campubmed> has an extra button for every paper, so you can check if Cambridge provides access that is different to the publisher access suggested by Pubmed



NCBI Resources  How To 

PubMed.gov  
US National Library of Medicine  
National Institutes of Health

PubMed    Help

Advanced

Format: Abstract 

Send to 

Full text links

Wolters Kluwer

**Online Full-Text**

Save items

Add to Favorites 

Similar articles 

Acad Med. 2018 Sep 11. doi: 10.1097/ACM.0000000000002447. [Epub ahead of print]

**Improving Employee Voice About Transgressive or Disruptive Behavior: A Case Study.**

Dixon-Woods M<sup>1</sup>, Campbell A, Martin G, Willars J, Tarrant C, Aveling EL, Sutcliffe K, Clements J, Carlstrom M, Pronovost P.

Author information

**Abstract**

PURPOSE: Employee voice plays an important role in organizational intelligence about patient safety hazards and other influences on quality of patient care. The authors report a case study

## 5 Ask the training team

Always happy to help – just email [librarytraining@medschl.cam.ac.uk](mailto:librarytraining@medschl.cam.ac.uk)