Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine

Galter Health Sciences Library & Learning Center

Beyond PubMed: Enhancing Your Literature Search with Multiple Databases

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Searching a variety of databases is the trademark of any comprehensive review. While PubMed is an excellent place to start, it will never give us the full plot of the information landscape on a single topic. This is especially critical when it comes to systematic and scoping reviews, which aim to reduce bias through comprehensive searching across multiple databases. All said, different databases serve different needs or focus areas. It is useful to know what each database covers, their modes of searching, and when might be the best time to utilize a specific database or skip it in favor of another option.

Google Scholar

Google Scholar is a go-to for many researchers because of its ease of use and familiarity. It includes a wide range of scholarly citations across various disciplines. Although Google Scholar benefits from the breadth of topic areas it covers, it can be difficult to pin down the scope of its coverage. Unlike most databases, Google Scholar does not index specific journals. Instead, the database relies on a bot to "crawl the web" for available articles.

When is it most useful?

The availability of articles may differ from one day to the next based on firewalls or other permissions that allow these web-crawling bots access to specific websites. This makes Google Scholar a great choice for background searching at the beginning of the review process but a less desirable choice when comprehension and reproducibility are the goals.

APA PsycINFO

APA PsycINFO is an abstract database focusing on scholarly content in the field of psychology from the early 1800s to the present. PsycINFO also hosts interdisciplinary coverage of literature in the behavioral and social sciences. It indexes journals, books, dissertations, videos, and other related material. Searchers can benefit from PsycINFO's thesaurus of controlled vocabulary to identify preferred and related terms for topic searches.

When is it most useful?

PsycINFO is best for topics focused on psychology and the behavioral and social sciences. It is also a valuable resource when you have a research question that addresses interdisciplinary topics (e.g. patient adherence to a specific therapy).

CINAHL Plus with Full Text

CINAHL Plus covers literature in the nursing and allied health professions. CINAHL can be a valuable resource for researchers in all fields due to the interdisciplinary nature of its contents, including coverage of the biomedical, nursing, complementary and alternative medicine, and allied health fields. The database has coverage going back to 1937, with 5,600 indexed journals (340 of which provide full-text content). The database also has its own controlled vocabulary, which helps researchers search for indexed concepts to easily locate related resources.

When is it most useful?

CINAHL is ideal when researching topics related to nursing, allied health disciplines, or alternative/complementary medicine. It is also useful if you want resources outside the typical journal article format as it includes books, book chapters, and dissertations.

Cochrane Library

Cochrane Library is a highly respected suite of multiple databases with a focus on resources for clinical decision-making. Cochrane Library includes three main coverage areas:

Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews (CDSR)

The CDSR is a leading resource for health-related systematic reviews and protocols. The database includes reviews developed and implemented by the Cochrane Review Groups. Each review follows strict Cochrane guidelines and undergoes peer-review.

Cochrane Central Register of Controlled Trials (CENTRAL)

The CENTRAL database is a composite of registered controlled trials from various other databases and registries (e.g. PubMed, Embase, ClinicalTrials.gov, and

WHO's International Clinical Trials Registry Platform), as well as unique content uploaded by the Cochrane Review Groups based on handsearching.

Cochrane Clinical Answers

Clinical Answers aims to synthesize information of the Cochrane Reviews and make them easily available for use in clinical care settings.

When is it most useful?

Cochrane Library is great for locating data or reviews on specific clinical or research questions because the topics are often highly specific. It is almost always searched when conducting a systematic review and is known for its high-quality content.

Reference Links:

https://scholar.google.com/intl/en/scholar/help.html#coverage

https://www.apa.org/pubs/databases/psycinfo

https://www.ebsco.com/products/research-databases/cinahl-plus-full-text

https://www.cochranelibrary.com/about/about-cochrane-library