

# Quick Guide: Pragmatic Literature Searches for NP Research and Quality Improvement (QI) Projects

This guide explains how to conduct non-systematic literature searches appropriate for exploratory research, QI projects, program development and background sections of manuscripts or presentations. These searches aim to identify key literature efficiently, not to capture every possible study.

## Pragmatic literature search process

### 1. Define the topic and choose 2–3 key terms

Before searching, identify the main concepts in your topic, then choose terms that reflect those concepts. Use synonyms and related terms to broaden your search or check relevant articles for the terms they use.

- Example topic: Telehealth follow-up for hypertension in a primary care setting.
- Concepts and related terms: Telehealth, telemedicine, remote monitoring; hypertension, high blood pressure; primary care.

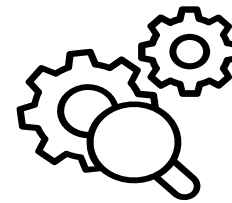
### 2. Consult with a librarian if you have access to one

Librarians are highly trained in literature searches. If your institution has a librarian, ask for a review of your search terms or a recommendation for databases or resources for your topic. Searching common health-related databases such as PubMed is more important for formal searches than pragmatic ones. Librarians may also be able to conduct database searches for you.

### 3. Use Google Scholar strategically

Google Scholar can support both forward and backward searching. Start with a few relevant articles — ideally a recent systematic review or another source that summarizes the literature.

- Review the article's reference list to locate earlier studies. This is called backward searching.
- Click "Cited by" in Google Scholar to find newer studies that cite the article. This is called forward searching.
- Use "Related articles" to identify additional similar research.



### Helpful search operators

Search an exact phrase using quotes	"remote blood pressure monitoring"
Combine topics using <b>AND</b>	hypertension AND telehealth
Search synonyms using <b>OR</b>	telehealth OR telemedicine
Exclude terms using a minus sign	telehealth - COVID
Search within a site using site:	hypertension guideline site: cdc.gov

### Set Google alerts

You can use Google Scholar to get daily emails with new articles on a topic. Run a search with your terms, then click "Create Alert" in the sidebar and provide your email address. When setting alerts:

- Keep your alert narrow.
- Set multiple narrow alerts instead of one broad alert.
- Check the first few alerts to make sure relevant literature is being included.
- Know that you can edit or delete alerts anytime.

#### 4. Check focused journals

Some journals might be particularly relevant to your topic and worth a separate search. For example, the Journal of American Medical Association (JAMA) Cardiology, Nature Reviews Cardiology and Circulation all focus on cardiovascular research.

#### 5. Set reasonable search limits

Pragmatic literature searches often apply time limits to focus on current evidence.

- Start with the last 10 years.
- Narrow to five years for rapidly evolving topics.
- Include older landmark studies if widely cited.
- Other helpful limits might include English language (if needed for feasibility) or U.S. based (if topic has policy- relevance).

#### 6. Screen results efficiently

You do not need to read every article during the search stage.

- Scan the title.
- Read the abstract.
- Confirm the population and topic match your question.



#### 7. Recognize when you have reached saturation

You are likely approaching saturation when:

- The same papers appear repeatedly.
- Multiple papers cite the same foundational studies.
- New papers provide little additional insight.

#### 8. Document your search process

Even for pragmatic searches, briefly record:

- Search terms used.
- Databases or platforms searched.
- Date ranges applied.
- Approximate number of articles reviewed.

#### Use Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools carefully

AI tools such as Google Scholar Labs, ChatGPT and Perplexity can help you start a literature search by suggesting search terms, narrowing a question, identifying related concepts and surfacing potentially relevant articles. Use them as a starting point, not an end point. Remember:

- AI tools may generate incorrect or fabricated citations.
- Results may be incomplete.
- Always verify references in trusted databases or journal websites.
- Do not rely on AI as the sole method for identifying literature.

#### Quick evidence credibility checks

Before relying on an article, ask:

- Is the article published in a reputable peer-reviewed journal?
- What study design is used (systematic review, trial, observational study)?
- Do multiple studies report similar findings?
- Is the sample size adequate for the research question?
- Do participant inclusion or exclusion criteria seem reasonable or overly broad or narrow?
- Are funding sources or conflicts of interest reported?
- Are the conclusions fully supported by the participants, measures and statistics or do they stretch beyond the findings?