The Cochrane Library

Available from work and home at: www.thecochranelibrary.com no log-in required.

Cochrane is one of the best sources of reliable evidence on the effects of healthcare interventions.

Typical questions answered by the Cochrane Library are:

‘How effective is this intervention for treating this condition?’
‘If I compare two interventions, which is the more effective?’
‘Which of these interventions is more cost-effective?’

If you find a systematic review that answers your question, you will be saved the work of searching databases for journal literature, as well as all the reading involved. So it’s worth looking at Cochrane first!

The Cochrane Library consists of several databases:

Cochrane reviews (Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews) – A systematic review identifies an intervention for a specific disease or other problem in health care, and presents the evidence for how effective this intervention is. To do this authors locate published and unpublished research on the topic, assess it for quality and synthesise the evidence from the studies to produce conclusions about the effectiveness of the intervention. Systematic reviews are designed to minimise the chance of bias, and so to ensure their reliability. Database continually updated.

Cochrane Reviews are of two types: full reviews and protocols. Protocols are reviews “in progress”. Full reviews continue to be updated at least every two years.
Other reviews (Database of Abstracts of Reviews of Effects) – Systematic reviews are also published in other journals and some of these cover topics not yet addressed by Cochrane reviews. DARE takes some of these reviews and publishes a structured abstract of each with a critical appraisal of it. Only reviews that meet minimum quality criteria are included. Not updated after 30th April 2015.

Trials (Cochrane Central Register of Controlled Trials) – CENTRAL holds details (not full text) of randomised and quasi-randomised trials from published and unpublished sources including trials rejected for Cochrane systematic reviews.

Methods Reviews/Methods studies (Cochrane Methodology Register) – This contains information on the methodology of conducting trials and systematic reviews. Not updated after July 2012.

Technology Assessments (Health Technology Assessment Database) – HTA contains references to health technology assessments. Ongoing projects are included so you may find information on new topics, but they are not critically appraised. Not updated after October 2016.

Economic Evaluations (NHS Economic Evaluation Database) – Contains structured abstracts with a critical appraisal of articles describing economic evaluations of health care interventions. Papers are included if they provide a comparison of treatments and examine both the costs and outcomes of the alternatives. Not updated after 30th April 2015.

Searching for Information

There are several ways of finding relevant material in the Cochrane Library.

1. Browsing by Topic

This is the simplest way to look for relevant items. Either scroll down the home page to find ‘Browse by Topic’ or click on Cochrane reviews from the purple menu bar at the top of the page and select ‘Browse by topic’ or ‘Browse by Review Group’.

Click on a topic of interest and you will then see a new page with a list of sub-topics on the left hand side; and in the centre of the screen a list of reviews.
2. Simple Search (search box top right of screen)

A search is done across all the databases and then you can choose which results to look at.

Use the search box at the top right of the screen. Enter “free-text” terms (i.e. words that you think of) and click on the magnifying glass symbol to search. E.g. asthma and child

The number of records found will be listed on the right hand side, with Cochrane Reviews being listed first. Browse the results and click on the title of the record to see the full-text. To view results from the other collections, select from the menu to the left of the results:
Do not use Simple Search for complicated searches. **Cochrane Search Manager** allows you to use your Search History to build up more complex searches and to refine your results or you can use **Advanced Search** to include more terms.

**Search Tips**

- If you want to search a phrase, you must enter it with quotes, e.g. “colon cancer”, otherwise the words will be searched as colon AND cancer, which will give many irrelevant results.

- Plurals are automatically searched, so searching *child* will also find *children*.

- You can truncate terms by using *. e.g. *depress* will find depression, depressive, depressed, etc. You can truncate at either end of a word or in the middle, e.g. *depress* also finds antidepressants.

- Some alternative spellings are automatically searched (e.g. tumor/tumour), but to be certain of catching them, use internal truncation, e.g. *isch*mic to find ischaemic or ischemic.

- Use brackets to control the order in which the search executes, if you are using a combination of AND and OR, e.g. magnesium AND (eclampsia OR perinatal asphyxia)

- NEAR can be used instead of AND to narrow your search. e.g. smoking NEAR pregnancy will find the two words within 6 words of each other in either order, so is more specific than using AND. NEAR/n will find the words within n words of each other in either order, e.g. NEAR/4.

- Medical Subject Headings (MeSH terms) are assigned to many records. These are controlled index terms and can be very effective in searching. You can use MeSH terms in place of or as well as free-text terms to search. See Tip below on page 11 for an easy way of finding relevant MeSH terms.

- If you find too few results, you could extend your search to words in the documents' full text by clicking the down arrow next to Title, Abstract or Keywords and selecting ‘Search All Text’.

To search for Trials only: click on the Trials link from the homepage then Search trials (CENTRAL) to go to search screen shown below.

‘in Trials’ will appear underneath the search box to show you are only searching the Trials register.
3. Advanced Search

Click the ‘Advanced Search’ link underneath the search box at the top right of the screen. The following screen will appear:

Start typing in your first search term and it will make suggestions of terms you may want to use. Continue typing or select one of the options. **NB:** Clicking on an option will add the term as a “phase” so it will not automatically search for plurals just the exact term. Click on the plus button to add additional search lines (up to a maximum of five lines).

This search form gives you more flexibility in formulating your search. You can use the drop-down menus to limit your search terms to different fields, e.g. Record Title.

Lower down the search form, you can apply limits to your search, e.g. to limit the search to a date range:

Automatically searches word variants e.g. plurals, British/American spelling, irregular verbs etc. To stop this, put term in “phrase” marks.
Select your limits then click ‘Apply’.

Once you have entered all your search terms and applied any limits you may want to use, click ‘Go’ to view the results.

Click on a title to view the full-text for an item.
4. Search Manager

The Search Manager feature enables you to build up more complex search strategies. Click on the “Search Manager” tab. Building up your search in Search Manager can be easier than trying to enter too many steps at once in the Advanced Search box. Here you can combine previous search sets to refine your search, by typing them in the search box. Note: you must use the # to combine set numbers, e.g. #1 and #2.

Click on the minus sign to delete a row. Click on ‘Edit’ to amend a row. Click on to apply limits to a search line.
Click on to add MeSH headings to your search strategy.
To view search results click on the number of results at the end of a search line.

5. MESH Search

MeSH (or “Medical Subject Headings”) are applied to each record which is added to Cochrane and you can search on these as well as entering your own search terms. The advantage of using them is that it helps to focus your search. When you enter your own free text search terms, it searches for those words anywhere in the title, abstract and keywords. So, for example, if you search for pregnancy it will retrieve all records which mention pregnancy even if pregnancy isn’t the main focus of the review. Searching on the subject heading for pregnancy should ensure that you retrieve articles which are actually about pregnancy.

To search for MeSH headings, from the MeSH page, type in your search term and click on “Lookup”.

---

**Add to top**

- Edit #1 smoking
- Edit #2 pregnancy
- #3 #1 and #2

**Search**

Enter MeSH term
pregnancy

**Search Manager**

Select MeSH qualifiers
Select subheadings / qualifiers

**Medical Terms (MeSH)**

View MeSH search tips
From the results screen check for a match in the left-hand column or check for other related terms under “Phrase Matches”.

In the middle column you should then have the option to select your term, which will default to “Explode all trees”. Exploding your search term means that any narrower MeSH headings on specific aspects of your search term will also be included in the search – for example, if you select explode for the MeSH heading “Pregnancy Complications” you will not only retrieve articles which include the subject heading “Pregnancy Complications” but headings relating to specific complications – for example, “Ectopic Pregnancy, Gestational Diabetes”, etc.

If you are unsure whether or not to explode a term, scroll down the page and have a look at the narrower terms for your chosen MeSH heading (they will be indented underneath your search term):

Once you have selected (and exploded, if required) your search term, the number of search results it has found will now appear in the right hand column. Click “View Results” to go to the results page, or “Add to
Search Manager”/ “Update Search Manager” (depending on if this is your first search term or not) to incorporate this MeSH search into your larger search strategy.

Using MeSH headings can enhance your search, but it is not essential and if you can’t find a MeSH term to match your search term, or if the MeSH heading is quite general but you are looking for something more specific, then you are better off sticking with your own free-text search term.

6. Viewing Search Results

Search Results are listed by relevance, with Cochrane Reviews listed first.

- Click Other Reviews, Trials, etc. to see the results for those databases.
- Instead of by relevance, you can list results by date or alphabetically.
- Click on a title to view the full-text for an item.
- See key on left hand side for what these mean.

Review = full review
Protocol = protocol (incomplete/in progress review)
When you click on the title of a review a screen will display the full text with links to the different sections on the left hand side. There are quick links on the left hand side.

Download a PDF version here (best format for printing) NB: some reviews may be very long (over 100 pages)

Scroll down this page to view a ‘Plain language summary’

Quick links to the different sections of the review

Tip: If you find a record that is exactly relevant to you click on the green ‘info’ button link and it will list the Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) that have been assigned to index the record.

Searching with these index terms can be very effective. Click on a MeSH term to perform a search on this term. This will take you to the MeSH search screen discussed above under section 5. Terms in brackets are subheadings of the main term.

Tip: To display just the tables and/or figures contained in the review click on ‘Figures’ or ‘Tables’. They will open up in a separate screen
7. Printing and saving search results/individual reviews

Printing and saving:
If you are looking at the full text of a systematic review or a methodology review remember these are often over 100 pages long. If you do need to print or save the document:

- Open the PDF version (summary, standard or full version) then print or save using the icons on the PDF toolbar.

Printing search results:

Select records from a list of results by ticking the box next to them

Click on ‘Export selected’ at the top or the bottom of the results page. It defaults to PC as export type. Then select to export citation only or citation and abstract. Tip: Change export type if you use a Mac, Unix/Linux. Click on ‘Export citation’. It will open as a text file and you can choose where to save the file to or print from the toolbar.

Saving your search strategy:
If you want to save your search strategy to run at a later date you need to register with Wiley who publish the Cochrane Library. This is completely separate from your OpenAthens registration, which is not needed for accessing Cochrane Library.
To register: click on ‘Log in / register’ in the top right of the screen and complete the required details.

To save a search strategy: click on ‘Save Search strategy’ from the Search Manager page. Enter a name for the search and click on ‘Save search strategy’. You will need to login to access your saved searches and to create email alerts from them.

Produced by:
Northamptonshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust Library Services
Richmond Library
William Kerr Building
Northampton General Hospital
Northampton
NN1 5BD
Telephone: 01604 545929
Email: richmondlibrary@nhft.nhs.uk
Internet: www.library.northants.nhs.uk

Last updated July 2018

Adapted from original version produced by Geoff Fleet, Buckinghamshire Shared Services by permission