Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) in PubMed

MeSH is NLM's vocabulary for indexing articles for MEDLINE/PubMed.

Use MeSH for more relevant search results
In the example (shown at right) the search premature labor AND drug therapy, limited to Review articles published in the last 5 years, retrieves 116 citations.

- Inspection shows that treatment of premature labor is not the focus of many of these citations.
- Rather than go through 118 citations to find the ones you need, you decide to refine your search with MeSH.

Step 1: Identify a MeSH heading for your main concept.

- Select the MeSH Database
  Use the Search drop-down menu to select MeSH instead of PubMed.

- Search for the Medical Subject Heading that corresponds to your patient or problem
  Enter your search term in the query box and click Search.

- Review possible MeSH matches
  The definition of each concept follows the term.

- Click on the appropriate term to select it
  In our example, the keyword phrase premature labor corresponds to the first result: Obstetric Labor, Premature.

- Try a simple MeSH search
  You can run a PubMed search on the MeSH heading Obstetric Labor, Premature by clicking the PubMed link on the right side of the record. For many searches this is useful, but we haven’t yet included the concept of drug therapy in our search.

You often need to add Subheadings or specify Major Topic headings to precisely focus your search!
Step 2: Use Subheadings and Major Topic headings

- **Check off subheadings**
  
  Attaching subheadings to a MeSH term ensures that the heading and subheading are coordinated.
  
  In this example, we are ensuring retrieval of citations about *drug therapy of premature labor*, not drug therapy of other conditions, such as infection, that may cause premature labor.

- **Check off “Restrict Search to Major Topic headings only”**
  
  This ensures that the articles address treatment of premature labor as a primary focus. Use this option carefully—it can be powerful, but it may eliminate relevant articles.

Step 3: Run the search

- **Click the “Add to search builder” button**
  
  Your MeSH term and subheading(s) will appear in the PubMed Search Builder box.
  
  - Note that you can add additional MeSH terms at this point by searching for them in the MeSH database and using the “Add to search builder” button.

- **Click the “Search PubMed” button** to search with the MeSH terms.

  - **Note**: To add in the date range (past 5 years) and article type (Review), click the link to Limits above the PubMed query box and check the appropriate boxes. Limit are “sticky” and only need to be set once.

Step 4: Check out the results now

In our example, we have focused our retrieval from 118 to 30 citations. More importantly, these citations directly address our question of drug therapy in premature labor.