

Keywords are:

- How you typically search web search engines.
- Natural language terms that describe your topic.
- Able to be combined in any number of ways.
- Lack consistency in usage, definition, and sometimes spelling (e.g. GERD vs. GORD).
- Either single words or phrases.
- Used to search for matching words or phrases anywhere in the article records the database contains (such as title, abstract, journal title).
- Used when no appropriate subject heading exists as an equivalent.
- Sometimes either too broad or too narrow, resulting in either too many or too few results.
- Reflective of recent phenomena in advance of when subject headings might be developed.

Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) are:

- Pre-defined “controlled” vocabulary words used to describe the content in a database.
- Consistent in their definition across the records in the database.
- Less flexible and *must* be chosen from the thesaurus used by the database.
- Only searched for in the subject heading field of the article record.
- Helpful for retrieving a set of articles with fewer irrelevant results.
- Slow to change--this means that the most recent changes in knowledge--on diseases, drugs, devices, procedures, concepts--may not be reflected in the controlled vocabulary.

Automatic Term Mapping

When you do a basic keyword search, PubMed returns articles with those terms, but also automatically maps your search terms to the MeSH that are used to index articles. The search results include the keywords and the MeSH term(s). This is one way to find relevant MeSH. You can also explore the MeSH database directly <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/mesh>.

Which should I use?

The simple answer to the question of whether you should use keywords or subject headings is: it depends. Some basic guidelines are:

- If the term or topic is very recent, keywords may be the best option.
- If no Subject Heading exists for your term, or seems inadequate, use a keyword.
- If the keyword is too vague or broad, a Subject Heading may help focus your search and eliminate too many results
 - e.g. neuroses would be a very broad keyword search
- If you want a very comprehensive literature search, you should use both a keyword AND a subject heading
 - e.g. “heart attack” OR myocardial infarction[mesh]