

**Health Information for the Public:  
Resources for the Nation's Public Libraries  
from the National Library of Medicine**

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**Introduction**

The National Library of Medicine (NLM), part of the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, is the world's largest health science library, historically serving the health professional community. The Library is widely known for MEDLINE®, a database of 12 million references and abstracts from over 4600 biomedical journals. NLM began offering free Web access to MEDLINE in 1997 via PubMed®, a powerful search system, and use of the database exploded from 7 million searches per year to more than 2 million per day. There are Web links to almost 4000 journals, allowing users to have access to the full text of articles in the database from publishers' sites, often for a fee, or from their own library if the library is a participating document provider. An extensive array of other features put a wealth of information at the fingertips of anyone who can access the Web.

A surprising result of free Web access to MEDLINE on PubMed was the finding that nearly one-third of the searches of the database came from members of the public, not from scientists, researchers and health professionals. That the public has taken increasing interest in researching health and wellness information for themselves and their family members is well documented. However, it was not anticipated that the public would turn to MEDLINE in their quest for health information.

In response to this need, NLM began a pilot program in 1998 to provide health information for the public. The pilot included the development of MEDLINEplus® ([www.medlineplus.gov](http://www.medlineplus.gov)) as NLM's Website providing free, up-to-date, authoritative, and understandable health information for health consumers, and a project with thirty-nine public library organizations to evaluate how NLM might assist public libraries in meeting the health information needs of their users. The pilot with public libraries was developed with the recognition that these libraries provide free information services to all citizens and that they are a community resource of particular importance to those without their own computers or access to the Internet. The result of the successful pilot was the continued expansion of MEDLINEplus as NLM's consumer health Website, a decision by the Library's Board of Regents in 1999 to include the public as an important audience for NLM's programs, and an evolving plan for assisting public libraries in providing health information to their users.

MEDLINEplus has expanded to cover more than 600 health topics, current news, drug information, easy-to-understand tutorials on many health conditions and procedures, and a Spanish language version in addition to many other features. The site logs 20 million page views each month. Next month's Science Books & Films will include an article focusing on the content and features of MEDLINEplus.

## **Resources from NLM**

The Library has developed online tutorials and resources that can assist librarians and users in their search for health information. Representative resources include:

### *MEDLINEplus Tour*

This brief online tour introduces new users to some of the important content of MEDLINEplus. It is arranged into subsections covering Health Topics, Clinical Trials, MEDLINE, Encyclopedia, Drug Information, and Physicians.

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/tour/tour.html>

### *MEDLINEplus Guide to Healthy Web Surfing*

This guide tells what users should look for when evaluating the quality of health information on web sites.

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/healthywebsurfing.html>

### *PubMed Tutorial*

This Web-based learning program shows how to search PubMed®, the National Library of Medicine's (NLM™) journal literature search system.

[http://www.nlm.nih.gov/bsd/pubmed\\_tutorial/m1001.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/bsd/pubmed_tutorial/m1001.html)

## **Resources from the NN/LM**

NLM has had strong relationships with the health science libraries in its National Network of Libraries of Medicine ([www.nnlm.gov](http://www.nnlm.gov)) for many decades. Contracts with the eight regional medical libraries (RMLs) and partnerships with more than 5100 NN/LM member libraries have been critical in our efforts to reach out to health professionals throughout the nation. This role has now expanded to include outreach to the general public with a special emphasis on working with public libraries. Public libraries are encouraged to join the NN/LM as affiliate members and many have done so.

Each RML develops its own programs within the general requirements of their contract. RML programs include providing consultations for libraries and groups building consumer health information services, providing consumer health information classes to librarians, and providing training sessions on medical

reference interviewing in the public library setting. Many network libraries have expertise in providing health information to consumers and have developed collaborations with the public libraries in their service area.

The NN/LM Web site provides access to a number of resources to help public libraries provide health information services to their users. Some examples are described below.

*Consumer Health: An Online Manual*

Composed by the Consumer Health Advisory Committee, National Network of Libraries of Medicine South Central Region.

The 15 'chapters' that comprise the manual cover subjects the librarians felt would have been helpful when they began organizing their consumer health collections. The manual is intended for use by librarians who are developing new collections, updating their existing resources, or looking for ways to expand services. <http://www.nlm.gov/scr/conhlth/manualidx.htm>

*Consumer Health Information: A Workshop for Librarians Providing Health Information to the Public*

Lorna Springton and Marsha Sullivan.

This hands-on course for librarians is taught at various locations throughout the US. The course covers the definition, trends, issues, sources and providers of consumer health information, as well as interview skills and techniques for handling health questions, aspects of setting up and managing a consumer health library, evaluation of online health information resources, and brief demonstrations of NLM systems and databases recommended for consumers. For information contact your Regional Medical Library at 1-800-338-7657.

*HEALTHINFOQUEST*

Maureen Carleton, Medical Reference Specialist, King County Library System, Bellevue, Washington.

This is a series of online pathfinders designed primarily for information providers such as public librarians to encourage them to experience firsthand the excitement of an information-seeking process and gain confidence in their ability to retrieve reliable health and medical information on the Web. The questions addressed are typical of those received in public libraries and the pathfinders are designed to model the intuitive nature of reference work.

<http://nlm.gov/healthinfoquest/>

The NN/LM also provides training for trainers on a variety of topics, and posts on the Website presentations and training materials, which can be modified to fit specific audiences and settings. In addition, RMLs provide funds for special projects. The amount of funding and the focus of these special projects differs from region to region.

Since 2000, through the NN/LM, NLM has funded 90 projects under its Access to Electronic Health Information program. The purpose of this outreach initiative is to ensure that health professionals, their patients and the general public are connected to the health information resources they need to make informed health care decisions. The focus is on projects designed to improve access to electronic health information for such groups and organizations as consumers, underserved and minority health care professionals, public health workers, public libraries, and community-based and faith-based organizations. Forty-four public libraries in 27 states have received funding or have been included in funded projects.

Announcement of the 2003 awards is available at <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/news/ehealth4public.html>.

## **Summary**

In addition to the development of MEDLINEplus as tremendously successful and trusted Website for the public to find the health information they are seeking, NLM and the NN/LM have created many resources that can help public libraries provide better health information services for their users. These resources are being added to, updated and new resources are being made available. For more information, visit the NLM ([www.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.nlm.nih.gov)) and NN/LM ([www.nnlm.gov](http://www.nnlm.gov)) sites or call your NN/LM Regional Medical Library at 1-800-338-7657.