Literature Reviews: how to find everything, why it matters, and when to stop.

A literature review provides background and context on who has conducted research related to yours, what that research has or has not uncovered, and it makes it clear how your research contributes to the knowledge or discussion in the field. A literature review makes critical use of previously published literature and can identify shortcomings, methodological problems, and differences between previous studies, as well as trends and similarities. Your literature review shows that you have understood, and is familiar with, all relevant previous research in the field.

It is therefore important that you have a sound search strategy and that you stick to this when conducting your searches for your literature review. You need to be able to demonstrate that you did not simply select articles for your literature review in a haphazard way, but that you worked through your strategy methodically in order to uncover all relevant literature. If you do not perform careful and comprehensive searches in line with your search strategy, you will miss relevant information and the context and justification for your own research will not be complete.

Your literature review is finished when you have researched all the available literature on a topic. Indicators of this are:

- you can demonstrate that you have conducted keyword searches in all the relevant databases, using all possible keywords related to the concepts in your research question.
- you can demonstrate that you have conducted the relevant MeSH/thesaurus searches in all the relevant databases and also combined the results of these with the results from the related keyword searches to check if you have missed any relevant articles.
- you have followed up any updates that you have received on your saved searches.
- you have followed up all relevant references that you have come across when reading books, articles and other resources.
- you are no longer encountering any unexplored references dealing with your research question/hypothesis or subject matter.
- you have checked other forms of information than journal articles and books for relevant information. Newspapers, social media, websites, government publications, and grey literature could be relevant to your research, depending on your topic.

If you find that it would take far too long to get to the stage when your literature review can be regarded as finished, you may need to narrow down your research topic. Consult with your supervisor/lecturer on this.