This is a Brief Online Learning Tutorial (or BOLT) brought to you by the LISTEN project, a HRSA funded project focusing on improving the information literacy competencies of nursing students and professional nurses.
Do you ever have questions that need to be addressed in the clinical setting? Finding relevant information to answer your question is often easier if you first develop a PICO question. PICO is a formula you can use to frame your clinical question. This tutorial will help you understand how to create a clinical question using the PICO formula.
The basic elements of a question based on PICO are: Patient’s population / disease or disorder, the Intervention you are considering, any Comparison (for example, of procedures or drugs), and the Outcome that you aim for. Consideration of all these elements makes it easier to formulate a well-built and focused question that can then be used to search a database or otherwise find an answer to your question.
Consider the patient population or the target disorder you would characterize as most important to your question. What disease or disorder concerns you, but also think about other factors that pertain, for example, the age group (such as elderly or pediatric), gender, range of years (do you want only the last two years, or are older articles of interest), and publication types (for example, randomized controlled trials).

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<th>Patient Population/Disease or Disorder</th>
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<td>Specific Disorder</td>
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Intervention is what you plan to do to help your patient and can include a number of exposures or treatments that may involve drug interventions, changing the patient’s perception, diagnostic tests, or prognostic factors. This is not an exhaustive list, but it should give you an idea of what is meant by intervention.
Comparison is linked closely with intervention and is a way to look for or to consider known alternatives to the treatment that you are considering. This is an optional component if you do not want to consider other interventions. You may not want to consider alternatives, and it is possible that there are no effective alternative interventions.

- Placebo
- Different drugs
- Diagnostic test
- Prognostic factor
- Surgery
The outcomes in your question may be the relevant outcomes indicated in the slide, such as morbidity, complications, risk of disease, accuracy of diagnosis and frequency of adverse outcomes. Including an outcome in your PICO question can improve the specificity of your search results to only those studies that included them.
The key to formulating a well-built and focused clinical question lies in the application of the P - I - C - O steps in each instance where you feel there is a valid question. Once you have formed your PICO question, you have the basics for translating it easily into the information resource (for example, CINAHL or PubMed/MEDLINE) that will have your answer.
Continue to visit the LISTEN website, at listenuphealth.org, for more helpful tips on using technology and seeking, evaluating, and applying information in nursing to support evidence-based nursing practice.
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