

## National Network of Libraries of Medicine: Helping public libraries succeed

*Carolyn Martin, Consumer Health Outreach Coordinator, NNLM Pacific Northwest Region*

Despite the seemingly infinite number of health links on Google, finding authoritative, reliable, updated information can feel similar to playing that old birthday game, Pin the Tail on the Donkey. You may have some idea of where to find a good health resource simply from advertisements, word of mouth, or sources that sound familiar - such as Mayo Clinic or WebMD. But you and your patrons may find that you can spend an inordinate amount of time wandering through page after page of results and still wondering if the information is reliable. The National Network of Libraries of Medicine (NN/LM), established through the Medical Library Assistance Act of 1965 and supported by the National Library of Medicine (NLM), can help your library provide patrons with the health information they need - and save your staff the time and frustration of blindly searching the Internet.

The NN/LM's mission is to "is to advance the progress of medicine and improve the public health by providing all U.S. health professionals with equal access to biomedical information and improving the public's access to information to enable them to make informed decisions about their health." Public libraries are an integral part of this effort. The NN/LM's eight [regional offices](#) enhance libraries' public health services through training, outreach, and funding - opportunities that are available to all libraries with a free membership. Member libraries and information centers in the NN/LM provide health information resources and services to both health professionals and the general public.

The National Library of Medicine, one of the 27 institutes and centers at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), is the world's largest biomedical library. NLM provides a wealth of [online health resources](#), including information on drugs and supplements, environmental health and toxicology, and general health information. The most well-known of these is [MedlinePlus](#), NLM's consumer health resource. MedlinePlus offers information on over 900 health topics from a variety of trusted sources such as the National Institutes of Health, KidsHealth.org, Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, and professional medical associations.

NLM does not create the information contained in MedlinePlus but curates information from a variety of trusted sources. The websites included in MedlinePlus must contain information that is accurate, well organized and easy to use. The links are evaluated and reviewed on a regular basis. MedlinePlus includes drug and supplement information, health quizzes, information about talking to doctors, parenting tips, explanations of medical terminology, and much more. Most patrons seeking health information will find what they need within MedlinePlus - whether it is a health topic, drug information, disaster preparedness information, a medical dictionary, or the location of the nearest dialysis facility. A complete list of health and medical resources for both the health professional and the consumer is available on the [National Library of Medicine's website](#).

Despite having access to these resources your library staff may feel uncomfortable answering health reference questions - or may feel a little too comfortable. While public libraries are an essential commodity in every community and are the "go to" place for many residents with health information needs, librarians are not doctors. The NN/LM can provide libraries with information and guidelines about responsibly offering a health reference service. The NN/LM also offers classes on the various NLM resources, as well as consumer health topics such as health literacy, teen health, senior health, and health in the news. A schedule of regional training opportunities is available [here](#).

These classes can be used towards receiving a [Consumer Health Information Specialization](#) through the Medical Library Association (MLA). MLA membership is not required to receive this specialization though there is a fee.

This additional training in consumer health can benefit your library, staff, and community by expanding your health and wellness programs and services. Stigma and lack of anonymity can make it difficult for your patrons to seek help and treatment for many health issues, such as mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence, and sexually transmitted diseases. NN/LM training can help your library both provide information about sensitive health issues and build programming around these difficult topics. Knowing your staff is professional and that privacy is a priority will help patrons trust the library not only as a resource but also as a service.

Public health plays a critical role in a community's quality of life. The [Edge Initiative](#), established by a [national coalition of leading library and local government organizations](#) and funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, can help your library assess your current health information services and improve access to health resources in your library, and the NN/LM would like to help. We can be part of your Action Plan as you work towards achieving many of the [Edge Benchmarks](#).

For instance, suppose your library would like to start a series of health and wellness programs for patrons of all demographics in your community, using tablets to make your program more interactive while demonstrating resources for good health information and wellness tools. The NN/LM has funding opportunities for acquiring tablets and can offer training to learn about the various NLM consumer health resources whether for teen health, senior health, Spanish language resources, mental health, nutrition, and more. This would help your library achieve Edge Benchmarks 1, 2, 3, 4, and 8.

Perhaps your library would like to collaborate with other organizations in the community to provide information about developmental disabilities and to work with the local school and Best Buddies to provide information about therapies, camps, financial information, and the local school's Individualized Education Program. NN/LM can help with ideas and resources for providing this type of information. These types of programs would assist the library in achieving benchmarks 3, 5 and 6.

Do students and homeschoolers use your library for educational purposes? Do you partner with the schools in your community? Few people know about the [K-12 health and science resources](#) provided by the NLM. These resources offer career information, lesson plans, and information on genetics, environmental health, and more, with games, interactive activities, videos, and even interdisciplinary possibilities in English, social sciences, and history. These tools and resources can also be used by school staff, teachers, students, and parents. Cross-institutional cooperation of this sort is integrated into every one of the Edge Benchmarks.

This is just some of what NN/LM has to offer public libraries as they seek to better serve their patrons and create healthier communities. Whether you wish to improve your library's online presence with freely available and reliable health information, or whether you want to add health and wellness programs and services, take a moment to review what NN/LM can do for you. To allow us to more fully serve you, consider becoming a member of your regional NN/LM. It costs so little (it's free!) and offers so much.