FAQs | OLSPub
About the OLSPub Initiative: Key Information for the Community

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What is PubMed?

▶ PubMed is a database of medical and pharmaceutical scholarly literature operated by the U.S. National Library of Medicine (NLM). Unlike other comparable databases, PubMed offers a quality-controlled search with particularly detailed subject indexing – a standard unmatched by any alternative. This makes PubMed the most important database in the life sciences. Many alternative services and third-party tools are also built on PubMed and depend on it.

Why does heavy dependence on a single central data source such as PubMed pose a risk for research and healthcare?

▶ PubMed is the central database for medical and pharmaceutical scholarly literature, with high-quality MeSH subject indexing. If access to PubMed were to be disrupted for any reason, or if its quality standards were to decline, this could lead to significant delays and risks. This would affect both clinicians searching for information and medical services and databases that rely on PubMed. Loss of access to PubMed could also critically impair medical and pharmaceutical research: setbacks of a month – or even just a week – would have immediate and far-reaching consequences. That's why it is essential to ensure redundancy and to develop an additional European infrastructure through OLSPub to safeguard against the loss of PubMed.

What is the OLSPub initiative and what does the project aim to achieve?

▶ OLSPub is a working title and stands for "Open Life Science Publication Database". The OLSPub project aims to create an open, reliable and sustainable European alternative to PubMed: an infrastructure platform and database for the integration, indexing and discovery of biomedical scholarly literature, with high-quality subject indexing and a governance model based on a network of operators and users.

Why is OLSPub strategically relevant right now?

▶ To reduce critical dependence on a single data source in science, it is common practice to mitigate risks through redundancy. In the life sciences, risk scenarios are currently not being mitigated to a sufficient extent. Since January 2025, there have been worrying developments at major U.S. research service providers such as the National Library of Medicine (NLM) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH), which have led to heightened concern about the integrity and reliability of literature searches and databases[1]. At the same time, there are no alternatives capable of taking over the services provided by a data source such as PubMed in the event of its failure.

Why can't AI be used as an alternative?

▶ AI can support research and analysis, but it cannot replace a reliable, curated and permanently archived data repository. AI systems depend entirely on the quality, availability and governance of the underlying publication data and tend to reinforce existing dependencies on a small number of non-European data sources rather than structurally reducing them. OLSPub is therefore needed to create the open and trustworthy infrastructure on which responsible AI-based applications can be built in the first place.

Why is ZB MED the right organisation to lead this project?

▶ Research libraries serve as key infrastructure for accessing research data. That makes them an important part of efforts to safeguard data sovereignty, both nationally and at the EU level. As Germany's central specialist library for the life sciences, we see our core mission as ensuring the provision of literature and data in this field while maintaining long-term data security, independence and integrity.

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[1] For example: access restrictions (https://www.iqwig.de/presse/im-fokus/us-wissenschaftspo-litik/auswirkungen-der-us-politik-auf-die-literaturrecherche/), changes to content (https://www.aerzteblatt.de/news/autismus-cdc-andert-infos-auf-webseite-0f8264ff-51cf-4d95-b219-83536ae28177), deletion of content (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2025_United_States_govern-ment_online_resource_removals), retraction of publications (https://climate.law.colum-bia.edu/content/cdc-orders-retraction-or-pause-publication-research-manuscripts), withdrawal from international partnerships (https://www.npr.org/2026/01/07/g-s1-104999/united-states-exits-international-organizations-united-nations)