Getting too many e-alerts?

Customizing searches, subscribing wisely can prevent e-mail clutter.

Maria I. Lapid, MD
Assistant Professor of Psychiatry

Simon Kung, MD
Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, Mayo Clinic College of Medicine, Rochester, MN

Are e-alerts cluttering your in box?

These indispensable e-mails offer immediate access to current clinical articles. But with so many e-alerts and search services available, useless alerts and irrelevant search results can clog your client—in the bargain slowing access to the data you need.

This article explains how to customize your subscriptions and choose e-alerts that most closely meet your needs.

WHICH E-ALERT IS BEST FOR YOU?

When new issues appear online, journals typically send out:

- **Publication alerts,** which provide a link to the journal's home page or current table of contents.

- **Tables of contents—or eTOCs.** Whereas publication alerts contain a few links, eTOCs list the current issue's full TOC with links to abstracts and full-text versions of each article.

- **Content alerts,** which consolidate links to new articles on a specific topic. Content alerts are sent each time a keyword on your interest list is included within a new article's title, keywords, or abstract.

- **Citation alerts** when an article on your list is cited. This helps you track how often authors are citing an article and alerts you to other articles in your field of interest.

- **Author alerts** when an article by a selected author is published, helping you consolidate links to current data from thought leaders on a given topic. Author alerts also help you track articles you've published.

- **Saved search alerts,** which retrieve a prior search each time the publisher's database is updated. This can help you avoid having to restart searches.

E-alerts usually are free, but a paid subscription to the journal often is required to access full-text articles.

Psychiatric journals offer many types of e-alerts:

- *Archives of General Psychiatry* offers free eTOCs, content, author, and saved search alerts, as well as links to "early release" articles that are published online before they appear in print.

- *The American Journal of Psychiatry* offers these alerts through HighWire Press as well as PDA services, which each month download TOCs, citations, and abstracts to your personal digital assistant. You need a (free) HighWire account to subscribe to these services.

Publisher alerts. Some journal publishers—including American Psychiatric Publishing, Elsevier, Karger, and Springer—offer free publisher alerts that announce online updates to all journals in their groups. Elsevier offers a range of e-alert services, including free issue, citation, and saved search alerts, and a quarterly alert listing the "25 hottest articles."

Publisher alerts contain links to several journals in one message. You don't need to subscribe to any one journal to receive a publisher alert, but the information is limited to that publisher's journals. American Psychiatric Publishing's alert, for example, offers links to *The American Journal of Psychiatry* and the publisher's other journals, but you need a separate alert for *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*.

CHOOSING AN E-ALERT SERVICE

Independent e-alert services, which scan the medical literature for links to pertinent articles, offer substantially more links than do publication or group e-alerts

HighWire Press , a division of Stanford University Libraries, hosts a searchable repository of full-text online articles from more than 900 journals—many of which can be accessed at no charge. HighWire also offers:

- eTOCs

- CiteTrack, an alert on new journal content based on search criteria (topics/keywords, authors, or articles being referenced or cited)

- PDA Channels, which delivers alerts to Palm OS and Pocket PC handhelds

- RSS (really simple syndication) feeds—compilations of alerts and headlines from various publications that must be viewed using RSS Reader software

- Subscription alerts, which warn users a few weeks before that their subscription will expire.

PubMed Central . Users can open MyNCBI accounts to save searches and receive alerts for new content, authors, journals, and saved searches.

AMEDEO offers weekly updates of journals by topic and alerts providing information on various medical fields. AMEDEO's "psychiatric disorders" link, however, lists articles only on depression and schizophrenia.

MDLinx offers daily updates of journal and medical news by specialty and subspecialty. "PsychLinx" provides links to psychiatry articles, by subspecialty or topic, and direct links to journals.

IngentaConnect sends users free monthly eTOCs from five journals. Institutions that purchase an institutional alerting license from IngentaConnect can receive unlimited new-issue alerts and free search alerts.

We find that using HighWire with PubMed Central offers an optimal yield of psychiatric articles. Paid alert services, such as as Ovid or Web of Science, require an institutional or personal subscription and offer no significant advantage over free services.

You can customize your e-alert based on specialty and specific search criteria. By scrolling to "Alert Sources" on the HighWire site, for example, you can choose to scan all PubMed content (abstracts), all HighWire-hosted content (abstracts and full text), or psychiatry journals only by clicking on "View list by topic" and checking the "Psychiatry" box.

Remember that e-alerts—no matter how effective they are or how many you receive—cannot link you to every article you need. Web searches will be necessary at times.

AVOIDING SPAM, VIRUSES, OTHER PROBLEMS

Before you subscribe to an e-alert, ask these questions to prevent unwanted e-mails:

Is the e-alert secure? As with any online service, giving your e-mail address when subscribing to an e-alert could open your client to spam or—worse—a virus transmitted via an unwanted message.

To reduce the risk, update your subscription form as needed to confirm your identity, and change your password yearly to guard your privacy. Most publishers/services enforce privacy policies that ensure safe transmission.

Is the journal site easy to navigate? The site should offer advanced search capabilities that allow you to customize searches. Instructions or answers to frequently asked questions about alert frequency, managing and refining alerts, and other issues should be clear and accessible.

Will my search terms work? Use specific terms to filter information. Whereas a broad search term such as "bipolar disorder" would yield a long list of irrelevant articles, a more specific term such as "bipolar maintenance therapy" would substantially narrow the search. Adjust and refine your search terms and update your interest list as needed to ensure an optimal flow of information.

Is the journal's Webmaster accessible? Contact the Webmaster if an e-alert is not meeting your needs or if you have suggestions for improvement. A link to the Webmaster should be listed on the "contact us" page.

RELATED RESOURCES

Cuddy C. HighWire Press and its journey to become the world's largest full-text STM online journal collection. *Journal of Electronic Resources in Medical Libraries* 2005;2:1-13.