

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT IMPACT FACTORS

Frances Norton  
St James's University Hospital Library

Many research institutions are now asking their staff to be strategic about where they send papers for publication. They are encouraging their researchers to send material to journals where the number of potential readers is high and to journals whose contents get frequently cited. These journals can be identified by their Impact Factor. Below are some of the commonly-asked questions posed to library staff.

**Q. What is a journal impact factor?**

**A.** It is a numerical measure of the impact a journal makes on its readership and on research

**Q. What will it tell me?**

**A.** The number will help you evaluate a journal's relative importance, especially when you compare it to others in the same field e.g. The BMJ impact factor is 4.411 but the Lancet is 17.332. The higher the number the greater the impact

**Q. What else is it used for?**

**A.** It is commonly regarded as a measure of which journals are highly regarded in their field, and therefore important when considering where to submit papers for publication. Publication in high impact factor journals is seen as a measure of cutting edge research quality and may reflect the reputation of the employing institution

**Q. Who calculates them?**

**A.** The figures have been calculated annually since 1961 by

the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) in Philadelphia, and published in their **Journal Citation Reports**

**Q. How are they calculated? (Here comes the science bit!)**

**A.** The impact factor is essentially a ratio between the number of times the articles a journal publishes are cited, and the number of times those articles could be cited during two consecutive years - it counts the number of times that papers in a particular journal are cited by all journals

eg if ONCOGENE publishes on average 21 articles per issue

and publishes twice a month, it publishes 48 issues in two years

which is a total of 1008 articles

If 136 of these articles are cited -

$1008 \div 136 = 7.387$

which gives ONCOGENE an impact factor of 7.387

**Q. What about the immediacy index?**

**A.** This index tells you how quickly (on average) an article from a journal gets cited. For researchers working in cutting-edge research, it can give a useful perspective and enables journals to be compared for immediacy of impact

**Q. Where can I find Impact factor lists?**

**A.** In the publication **Journal Citation Reports**. Generally speaking, only held in large libraries because of the high cost of the subscription. Not currently available free on the Web from home for copyright reasons.