

From individual studies to evidence synthesis and guidance

Different designs and evidence products serve different roles. Certainty depends on methodological quality and on the question being asked—not on a universal ladder.

STUDY DESIGN

Observational designs

Study patterns, associations and outcomes in real-world or defined populations. They can contribute to causal inference when well designed and analysed, but do not establish causation on their own.

Example: A cohort study examines vegetable intake and later cardiovascular risk.

STUDY DESIGN

Intervention designs

Evaluate effects of assigned changes. Randomised controlled trials can strengthen causal inference, but not every intervention study is randomised or well controlled.

Example: A randomised trial tests a dietary pattern and blood pressure.

EVIDENCE SYNTHESIS

Systematic reviews

Use predefined methods to identify, appraise and synthesise relevant studies for a focused question. Conclusions depend on the included evidence and the review methods.

Example: A review evaluates trials of omega-3 interventions and cardiovascular outcomes.

STATISTICAL METHOD

Meta-analysis

A statistical synthesis method that may be used within a systematic review when appropriate pooling is possible. Pooling does not correct biased or incompatible evidence.

Example: Compatible studies are pooled to estimate an average effect.

GUIDANCE

Evidence-informed guidelines

Translate bodies of evidence into recommendations. They also consider benefits and harms, certainty, values, feasibility, resources and context. Guidelines are evidence-informed recommendations, not a study type.

Example: A national nutrition guideline combines evidence with judgements about benefits, harms and implementation.

Questions to ask

- What question is being asked?
- Which design or evidence product fits it?
- How were studies conducted and appraised?
- Are estimates precise, consistent and applicable?
- What assumptions or limitations remain?



Key principle

Certainty is not determined by position on a simple ladder. It depends on the question, design, conduct, risk of bias, precision, consistency and applicability of the evidence.

