Cochrane Review development

Cochrane Handbooks

Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions

The Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions is the official document that describes in detail the process of preparing and maintaining Cochrane systematic reviews on the effects of healthcare interventions.

This handbook is available to browse online for free and a hard copy is available to purchase. Cochrane members can download individual PDF versions of the handbook chapters via login.

Cochrane Handbook for Diagnostic Test Accuracy Reviews

A Cochrane handbook for diagnostic test accuracy reviews is in development. Completed chapters are available on the Diagnostic Test Accuracy Working Group website.

Editorial approval

The Cochrane Review Group's Co-ordinating Editor or nominated deputy must approve each Cochrane Review or Protocol of a Cochrane Review before it can proceed for publication in the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews. Approval is also required by the Cochrane Diagnostic Test Accuracy Editorial Team for Diagnostic Test Accuracy Cochrane Reviews or Protocols for Cochrane Reviews.

The Cochrane Review Group's editorial team has the right to transfer editorial responsibility to another Cochrane Review Group; and to withdraw the review if it does not meet the standards of the Cochrane Review Group and/or The Cochrane Collaboration.

Registering titles

- Registering titles for new Cochrane Reviews.
- Co-registration of titles with the Campbell Collaboration.

Registering titles for new Cochrane Reviews
All proposed Cochrane Reviews must be agreed with the relevant Cochrane Review Group and registered as titles with that Cochrane Review Group. This process is important to prevent duplication of effort and also to make sure the topic is appropriate for a Cochrane Review and complements the existing and ongoing work of the Cochrane Review Group.

How to propose a review and register a title

Authors interested in working on a particular review should refer to the guidance on the steps and principles involved in registering a title on the Cochrane website and in the *Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions*:

- Cochrane Community: Proposing and registering new reviews
- Cochrane Handbook Section 2.3.3: Registering a protocol

Authors are required to complete a Review Proposal Form (formerly called a Title Registration Form) and submit it to the relevant CRG. Review Proposal Forms are available from Cochrane Review Group websites.

Standard title formats

There are standard formats for Cochrane Review titles, as set out in Table 4.2.a of the *Cochrane Handbook*.

Non-standard titles are automatically alerted to the Cochrane Editorial Unit, where they will be considered alongside current guidance for title structures in the *Cochrane Handbook*. The Cochrane Editorial Unit may suggest alternative title formulations, but the final decision on a title rests with Cochrane Review Groups.

Registering a diagnostic test accuracy review

Although Cochrane publishes reviews of diagnostic test accuracy (DTA), not all Cochrane Review Groups are currently registering titles for DTA reviews. Those interested in conducting DTA reviews should contact the relevant Cochrane Review Group and visit the DTA Working Group website.

Managing title registration (for Cochrane Review Groups)

There are standard forms that Cochrane Review Groups may modify and use to receive review proposals from authors. These forms, developed by the Cochrane Editorial Resources Committee, were previously called Title Registration Forms and were renamed Review Proposal Forms in 2013.

- Review proposal form for intervention reviews
- Review proposal form for DTA reviews
- Review proposal form for overviews
On receiving a completed Review Proposal Form, the Review Group Managing Editor will initiate a Title Registration workflow (see workflows section); this workflow is described in a flowchart:

- Cochrane IMS: Workflow template: Title Registration (Version 1.4)

In situations where a Cochrane Review Group editorial team considers a proposed title to be potentially important but outside the scope of their group, they may ask the Cochrane Editorial Unit to assist review author teams in finding an appropriate Cochrane Review Group.

**Co-registration of titles with the Campbell Collaboration**

*We are working on this section. Please contact us for more information.*

**Managing expectations**

**What does Cochrane expect of authors, and what can authors expect of Cochrane?**

**Policy background**

The preparation and maintenance of high quality systematic reviews requires contributors with diverse competencies and skills, supported by staff from the editorial bases of Cochrane Review Groups (CRGs) and Centres. Cochrane is committed to encouraging wide participation in which the opportunities to contribute should be equally available to all. In practice, reconciling the Cochrane’s principles of inclusivity with the limited capacity of CRGs and Centres to offer open-ended support necessarily means that the CRGs have to be pragmatic when considering approaches from new review teams. For authors who are thinking about preparing a Cochrane Review, there needs to be clear information about what is expected of them in terms of skills and competencies, and in return what they can expect from CRGs and Centres by way of training and support.

Accepting that there are considerable variations across CRGs and Centres and international settings, the following policy sets out the broad expectations of author teams, CRGs and Centres, and forms the basis of a ‘contract’ between authors, CRGs and Centres.

**Review teams**

Cochrane Reviews have to be prepared by at least two people, and often may require more than two. A team must have among its members the range of skills and experience in order to complete a Cochrane Review to the standard required by Cochrane and that the users of Cochrane Reviews have come to expect. These skills and experience include:

- content knowledge relating to the topic of the review;
• basic knowledge of systematic review methodology (including formulating the review question and eligibility criteria, searching and assessing the risk of bias of relevant studies);
• basic statistical knowledge in order to extract appropriate data, conduct meta-analyses where appropriate, and interpret and discuss the results;
• the ability to write a scientific report of publishable standard in English;
• project management and leadership ability within the team (usually the named Contact Person).

In addition, all authors of a review team should:

• approach the review with scientific rigour, be as objective as possible, and avoid conflicts of interest;
• be comprehensive, systematic and methodical in their approach to all aspects of the review;
• follow the advice and guidance in the *Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions*, taking account of any specific instructions or preferences a CRG may have.

The named Contact Person should:

• submit a fully completed Cochrane Title Registration Form on behalf of the review team, with realistic and achievable timelines for completion of the Protocol and full Review;
• submit a current CV or provide evidence of previous experience in preparing systematic reviews, if requested;
• keep in touch with their CRG about their progress;
• respond to correspondence from their CRG in a timely manner.

The review team should be aware of its limitations, be willing to receive and respond to suggestions from the CRG editorial team and referees, be willing and able to see the review through to completion, and to address updates.

To help authors, once a title has been accepted and registered, Cochrane provides a range of training covering the steps involved in preparing a Cochrane Review (e.g. online learning, workshops and webinars). This does not mean Cochrane has the resources or capacity to provide open-ended support to teams of novice review authors; authors are still expected to be familiar with the principles of systematic reviewing and to demonstrate that they have the capacity to complete a review.

Despite support and encouragement, sometimes review teams struggle to make sufficient progress with their review, or they submit draft versions that would require too much input from the CRG editorial team to meet acceptable standards. In these circumstances, the CRG may decide to withdraw the review from the authors, citing concerns over quality and the capacity of the review team to complete the review.

It should be recognised that throughout the process of review preparation (be it at the title registration, protocol or review stage) the review could be taken out of the editorial process due to
concerns about quality that cannot be resolved.

**Cochrane Review Groups (CRGs)**

CRG editorial teams should provide details on their website of the support they can provide to their review teams. The support provided may vary from CRG to CRG and may change over time as the CRG matures or circumstances change. CRGs need to ensure that their limited resources are used to the maximum benefit of the users and funders of the CRG, so that decisions in relation to prioritisation of reviews are inevitable.

CRG editorial teams should:

- make explicit to potential review teams the level and type of support they can provide;
- acknowledge receipt of completed Cochrane Title Registration Forms and inform the authors within two weeks of receipt of the Title Registration Form when they can expect to receive feedback on their proposal;
- provide potential review teams with up-to-date details of the editorial process and timelines for new proposals submitted for editorial consideration, including information concerning prioritisation of topics;
- respond to correspondence from their review teams in a timely manner;
- put potential review teams in touch with their reference Cochrane Centre if required.

**Cochrane Centres**

Cochrane Centres and Branches provide different types of training to review authors, either formally through courses, workshops and webinars, or informally through individual support. Differences in the resources available at Centres and Branches mean that the level and volume of training and support on offer varies considerably. Despite these differences in capacity, Centres and Branches are expected to provide a minimum level of support. For example, some authors may require additional help in navigating Cochrane processes, especially if they are from countries where systematic reviews are less familiar or English is not their first language. Likewise, if there are communication issues or disputes between author teams and CRGs, then Centres and Branches should offer to mediate.

In respect of training and support, as a minimum Centres and Branches should:

- provide advice to prospective review authors on the requirements, expectations and processes of preparing a Cochrane Review;
- indicate what sources of support are available locally, including listings of relevant workshops and courses;
- ensure the training provided is consistent with the Cochrane's approved training resources;
- help resolve any communication issues or disputes between CRGs and authors, either with respect to registering a title or completing the protocol/review;
- help with a range of basic queries concerning review methods, editorial processes and using the RevMan software.
The flowchart "Managing expectations.pdf" (also available from CRG editorial teams) provides the available options when processing new proposals from review teams.

Standards for Cochrane Reviews

MECIR

Methodological Expectations of Cochrane Intervention Reviews (MECIR)

Cochrane has agreed standards for the conduct and reporting of Cochrane Reviews of interventions. These standards specify the core attributes of Cochrane Reviews on the effects of interventions. They provide authors and users of the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews with clear and transparent expectations of review conduct and reporting. Cochrane Review Groups will also be able to use them to evaluate reviews during the editorial process and facilitate support. Editorial bases, editors and review authors are expected to ensure these standards are met in Cochrane Reviews of interventions. Each standard is given a status of either mandatory (defined as compliance required for publication) or highly desirable (defined as expected but may be justifiably not done). The standards and additional information are available at methods.cochrane.org/mecir.

The standards are compliant with the PRISMA standards with, currently, the exception of item 1 on the checklist: ‘Title: identify the report as a systematic review, meta-analysis, or both’. Review authors and Cochrane Review Groups are expected to follow the standards developed specifically for Cochrane Reviews, in conjunction with PRISMA should that prove to be helpful.

PLEACS

Plain Language Expectations for Authors of Cochrane Summaries (PLEACS)

Cochrane has approved standards for the content of plain language summaries of Cochrane Reviews. These standards specify the key messages from Cochrane Reviews that should be included in the plain language summary. They include the requirement that text be written in plain English, so the core components of writing for a lay audience are presented in the rationale for the
first standard.

The standards provide authors with guidance on the composition of plain language summaries. Cochrane Review Groups will be able to direct authors to these standards for use in writing plain language summaries. Editorial bases, editors, and review authors are expected to ensure that all plain language summaries are compliant with these standards.

Each standard is given a status of either mandatory (defined as compliance required for publication) or highly desirable (defined as expected but may be justifiably not done). The standards and additional information are available at methods.cochrane.org/mecir.

The process of writing plain language summaries: drafting, editing and final approval

The first draft of the plain language summary should be written by the review author and submitted with the review to the relevant CRG. The writing of plain language summaries, however, is a specific skill, and review authors and CRGs may need support. Many CRGs have this skill within their editorial team, but where this is not available, a central support service will assist CRGs in writing and editing plain language summaries if they choose to access this support. The following flow chart outlines the use of this service:
The central summary support service will be maintained by the Cochrane Consumer Network (ccnet-contact@cochrane.de), with the support of the Cochrane Editorial Unit. CRGs wishing to access this service should send the review to the above address. The ownership and final approval of the plain language summary, as a mandatory part of the review, remains with the CRG and the review author.

Figures and tables

General reporting guidelines

Each figure and table must have a caption providing a brief description (or explanation) of the figure and must be referred to in the review text (via a link in RevMan).
To ensure the best presentation of published reviews (particularly in the PDF version), Cochrane Reviews should include a maximum of six figures, but ideally between 3 and 5. Only the most important tables should remain as ‘Additional tables’ and other additional tables should be moved to the Appendices and referenced with a hyperlink.

Further guidelines about figures and tables are available in the RevMan Userguide.

**Quality requirements of figures and tables**

*We are working on this section. Please contact Jacob Riis ([jr@cochrane.dk](mailto:jr@cochrane.dk)), Nordic Cochrane Centre, for information.*

**Copyright**

*When using images the authors have not produced themselves*

Authors are responsible for obtaining permission for images included in the review and for following guidance to ensure the images are fit for publication. If permission to publish a copyrighted figure is granted, the final phrase of the figure caption must be: “Copyright © [Year] [Name of copyright holder, or other required wording]: reproduced with permission.”

*To preserve rights on images the authors have produced*

*We are working on this section. Please contact Harriet MacLehose ([HMaclehose@cochrane.org](mailto:HMaclehose@cochrane.org)), Cochrane Editorial Unit, for information.*

**Images showing sensitive information**

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**Cochrane Review updates**

**Definition of an updated Cochrane Review**

An *update* of a Cochrane Review *must* involve a search for new studies. If any new studies are found, these must be added to the relevant section of the Cochrane Review and classified as included, excluded, or ongoing studies (or ‘Studies awaiting classification’ if all reasonable efforts to classify it in one of these ways have failed), before labelling the revised Cochrane Review as an update.
Any other change to a Cochrane Review, and any change to a Protocol for a Cochrane Review, is an **amendment**, which could involve a little or a lot of work.

These definitions are from Chapter 3 of the *Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions*.

**Frequency of updating Cochrane Reviews**

A Cochrane Review should be updated based on need. Aspects to consider are the currency of the question, the impact and usage of the current version, the availability of additional studies (or additional data for studies already included), and an assessment of the likely change of any newly identified studies or additional data on the current review version; in addition to methodological enhancements that may be required.

Refer to the [Updating Classification System](#) to help assess and report on the updating status of an individual Cochrane Review.

**Living systematic reviews**

Cochrane is exploring the feasibility of producing and publishing living systematic reviews (LSRs). Living systematic reviews offer an approach to review updating in which the review is continually updated, incorporating relevant new evidence as it becomes available. The first pilot LSRs are expected to be available on the Cochrane Library in 2017. This work is being led by Cochrane's [Project Transform](#) with support from the [LSR Network](#). For more information about Cochrane's LSR pilots, including the interim guidance document for conducting LSRs, see [Living Systematic Reviews](#).

**Citation of updated Cochrane Reviews**

Since April 2012, all updated Cochrane Reviews receive a new citation so that the wording of the abstracts is always consistent between the *CDSR* and MEDLINE and other databases. This applies to all updated Cochrane Reviews because at the very least any update will include a new ‘search date’. Citations to updates should be given even when a new search reveals no new trials, and when there are no edits made to the Cochrane Review apart from updating the search. Every time a Cochrane Review receives a new citation, the previously cited version is archived in the *CDSR* alongside the current version (see the ‘Other Versions’ tab).

**Selecting ‘What’s new’ events for updates to Cochrane Reviews**

Two ‘What’s new’ events must be selected for Cochrane Review updates in Review Manager (RevMan); see Table 1. The first is ‘Updated’. The second depends on whether the review conclusions have changed following the update (‘New citation: conclusions changed’ or ‘New citation: conclusions not changed’).

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**Table 1. Selecting the two ‘What’s new’ events in RevMan for Cochrane Review updates**

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### Types of updates

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<th>Types of updates</th>
<th>RevMan event 1</th>
<th>RevMan event 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cochrane Review update and conclusions changed</td>
<td>Updated</td>
<td>New citation: conclusions changed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cochrane Review update and conclusions not changed</td>
<td>Updated</td>
<td>New citation: conclusions not changed</td>
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### Acknowledging previous versions of the review within an updated review

Updated Cochrane Reviews should acknowledge and cite the previous versions of the same Cochrane Review in the section ‘Other published versions of this review’ in RevMan, and the Cochrane Review text should reference the citation and make clear to readers that a previous version or versions have been published. The need for transparency in the publishing record of a Cochrane Review highlights the importance of citing every updated Cochrane Review so that there is a permanent record available to readers in the CDSR.

### Licence for publication and declaration of interests forms

Authors need to complete a new licence for publication form and declaration of interest form each time an update is published.

Also see ‘Changes to citation and author contact details in published Cochrane Reviews’.