

<b>1.2.2 What is a systematic review?</b> .....	<b>2</b>
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## 1.2.2 What is a systematic review?

A systematic review attempts to collate all empirical evidence that fits pre-specified eligibility criteria in order to answer a specific research question. It uses explicit, systematic methods that are selected with a view to minimizing bias, thus providing more reliable findings from which conclusions can be drawn and decisions made (Antman 1992; Oxman 1993). The key characteristics of a systematic review are:

- a clearly stated set of objectives with pre-defined eligibility criteria for studies;
- an explicit, reproducible methodology;
- a systematic search that attempts to identify all studies that meet the eligibility criteria;
- an assessment of the validity of the findings of the included studies, for example through the assessment of risk of bias; and
- a systematic presentation, and synthesis, of the characteristics and findings of the included studies.

Many systematic reviews contain meta-analyses. Meta-analysis is the use of statistical methods to summarize the results of independent studies (Glass 1976). By combining information from all relevant studies, meta-analyses can provide more precise estimates of the effects of health care than those derived from the individual studies included within a review (see Chapter 9, Section 9.1.3). Meta-analyses facilitate investigations of the consistency of evidence across studies, and the exploration of differences across studies.