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Which studies should be included in the “Characteristics of excluded studies” table?

A large number of studies are likely to be screened during the process of conducting a review. It is not practical or helpful to list all the excluded studies that are screened in the ‘Characteristics of excluded studies’ table. Review authors must make judgements about which studies to list in that table.

Studies that appear to meet the inclusion criteria for a review, but were excluded, should be listed in the excluded studies table – particularly studies that readers might plausibly expect to see among the included studies. Reasons for listing an excluded study include:

- Perceived relevance – if a study is likely to be thought relevant by some readers, who may wonder why it was excluded
- Studies included in another review addressing the same question
- Disagreement – if the review authors initially disagreed about whether a study met an inclusion criterion
- Uncertainty – if the review authors were uncertain about whether a study met an inclusion criteria (and it was not subsequently obvious that it did not)
- Missing information – if it was necessary to obtain missing information from the investigators to determine that a study did not meet an inclusion criterion

A reason for exclusion should be given. Generally a single reason for exclusion is sufficient. Examples of reasons for exclusion include:

- Not randomised trial
- ITS: insufficient number of observations
- CBA: Only one [intervention and/or control] site
- Study type: uncontrolled before-after study
- High-income country – *if only studies from low- and middle-income countries are included*
- Not [intervention]
- Not [e.g. healthcare professionals]
- Multifaceted intervention: not possible to disentangle the effects of [intervention]
- Control group received [intervention]
- [Primary (main) outcomes for the review] not reported - *if the review excludes studies that only report secondary outcomes*
- Outcomes [e.g. based on self-report or measured in test situation]

Randomised and non-randomised trials that are excluded should be clearly labelled at the beginning of the reason for exclusion (e.g. Randomised trial: Not [intervention]). The reason for this is that these studies will be checked for inclusion in the Cochrane Central Register of Controlled Trials (CENTRAL) and the EPOC inventory of policy trials.

Studies that are excluded for multiple reasons (i.e. that do not meet more than one inclusion criteria) or that obviously do not meet the inclusion criteria (and which readers would be unlikely to expect to see among the included studies) should generally not be listed in the excluded studies table.