A traditional distinction in the natural sciences (for example, physics and chemistry) is between pure research and applied research, which mirrors a similar distinction between pure science and applied science. Pure research is done only to advance knowledge, while applied research tries to find solutions to specific problems or apply scientific knowledge to the development of technology to use in the world.

Scientists doing human research do both, but the type of research most likely in a clinical setting is applied research. Medical researchers often test new drugs and treatments to find out if they are safe and effective. Among such research trials, a commonly-held distinction is between therapeutic and nontherapeutic research. Therapeutic research is intended to benefit some or all of the specific research subjects (at least it is hoped it will). Nontherapeutic research is intended to increase knowledge and may benefit individuals in the future who take the medication or treatment in question, for instance, but the research is not intended to benefit the specific research subjects. The research subjects in therapeutic research will likely be suffering from some disease that the treatment being tested might help or cure. This is