

# **Methods to detect and account for inconsistency**

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Acknowledgements for some slides: Julian Higgins

# Who is tallest?

*Anna*

*Boq*

*Cora*



# Inconsistency can be viewed as a special form of heterogeneity

“Dispertion in the relative treatment effects evaluated in *different settings*”

When different settings means different studies= **heterogeneity**

# Inconsistency can be viewed as a special form of heterogeneity

“Dispertion in the relative treatment effects evaluated in *different settings*”

When different settings means different sources of evidence= **inconsistency**

# Inconsistency can be viewed as a special form of heterogeneity

*Heterogeneity: variability beyond chance within a comparison*

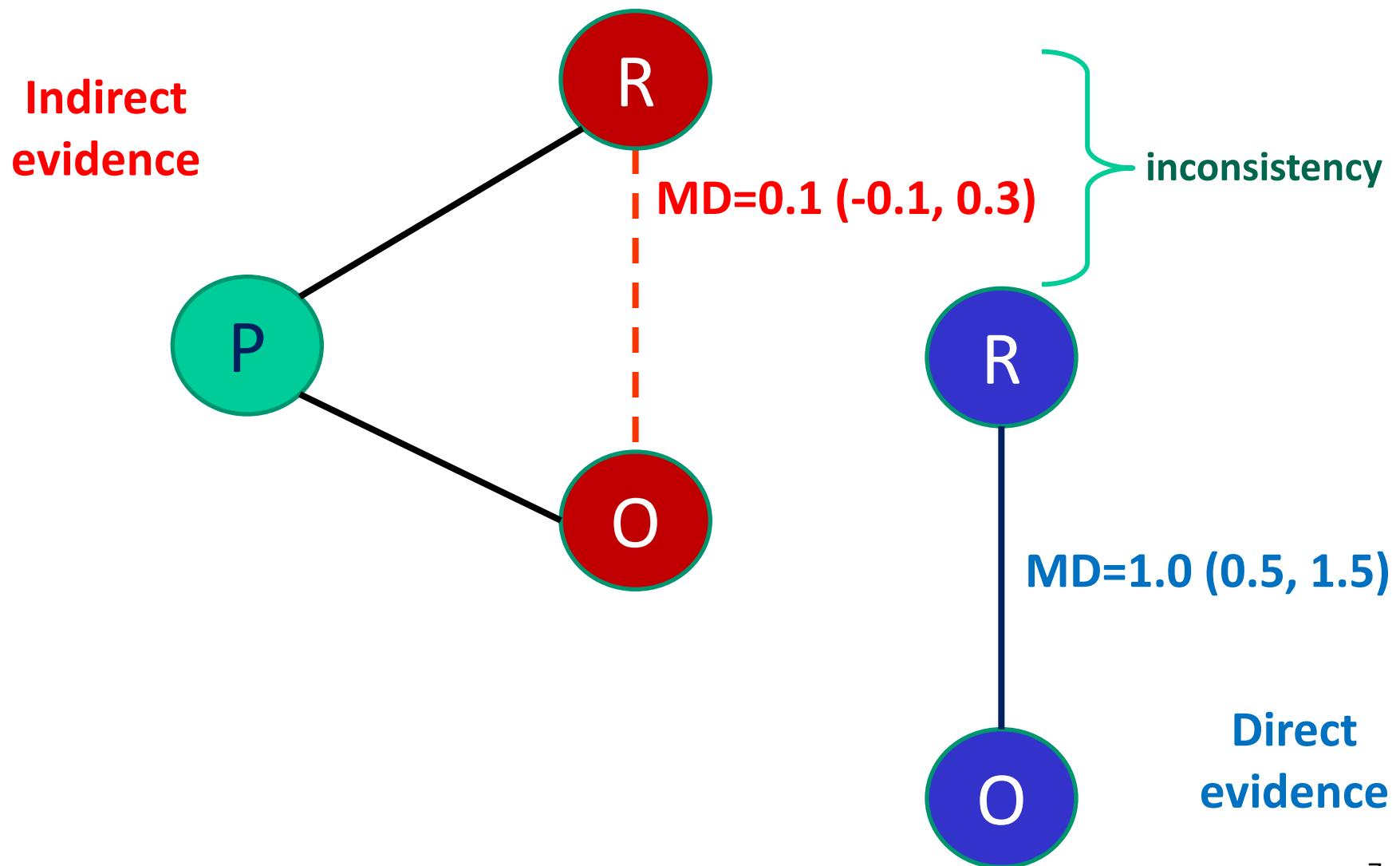
*Inconsistency: variability beyond chance across comparisons*

# The concept of consistency in a network

A network is **consistent** when the various pieces of evidence (direct and many indirect sources) are in agreement

If the transitivity assumption does not hold this **may** lead to **inconsistencies** (**but not always!**)

# Inconsistency



# Estimating inconsistency

- In a ABC loop of evidence:

$$IF = |\mu_{BC}^I - \mu_{BC}^D| = |\mu_{AC}^I - \mu_{AC}^D| = |\mu_{AB}^I - \mu_{AB}^D|$$

$$\text{var(IF)} = \text{var}(\mu_{BC}^I) + \text{var}(\mu_{BC}^D)$$

$$95\% \text{CI}: IF \pm 1.96 \sqrt{\text{var(IF)}}$$

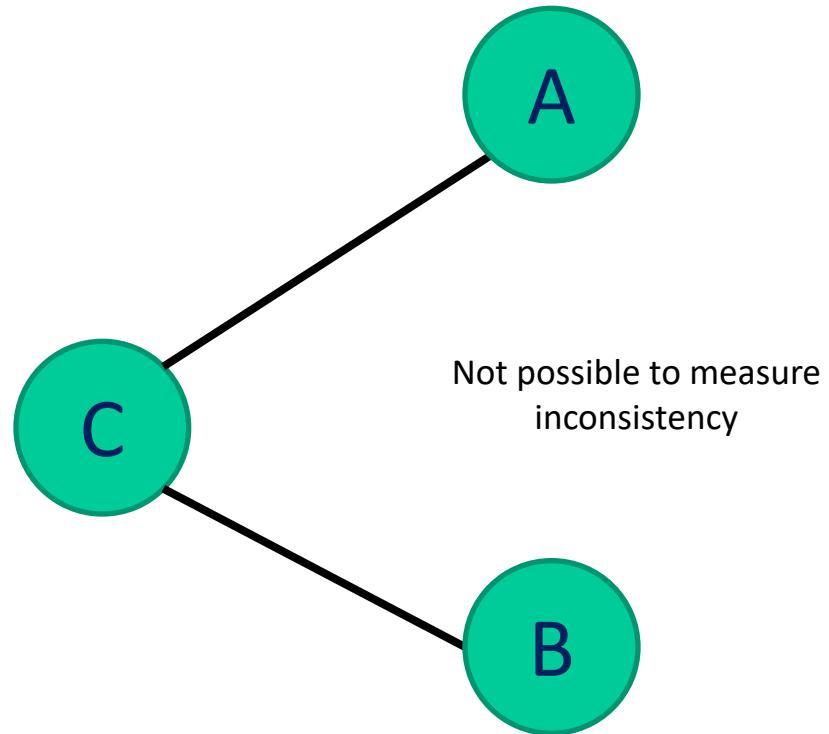
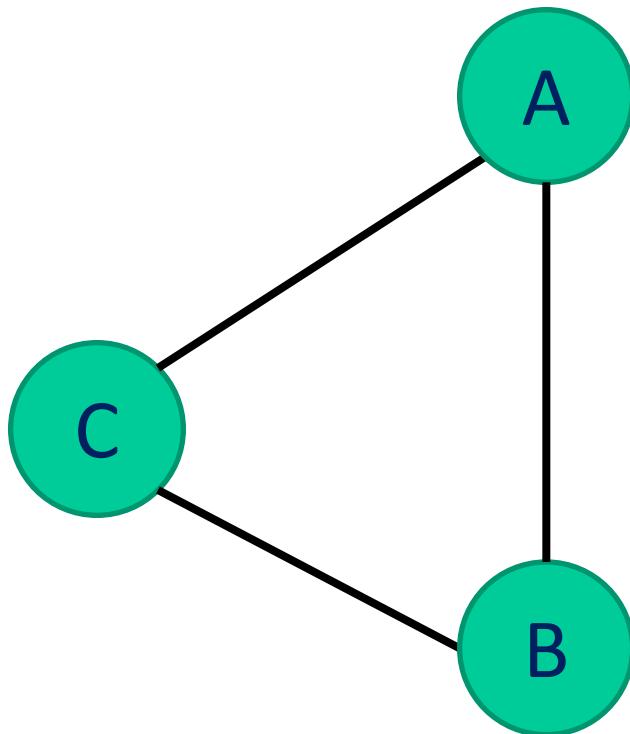
- If the 95% CI excludes zero, then there is statistically significant inconsistency
- A test for  $H_0: IF=0$

$$z = \frac{IF}{\sqrt{\text{var(IF)}}} \sim N(0,1)$$



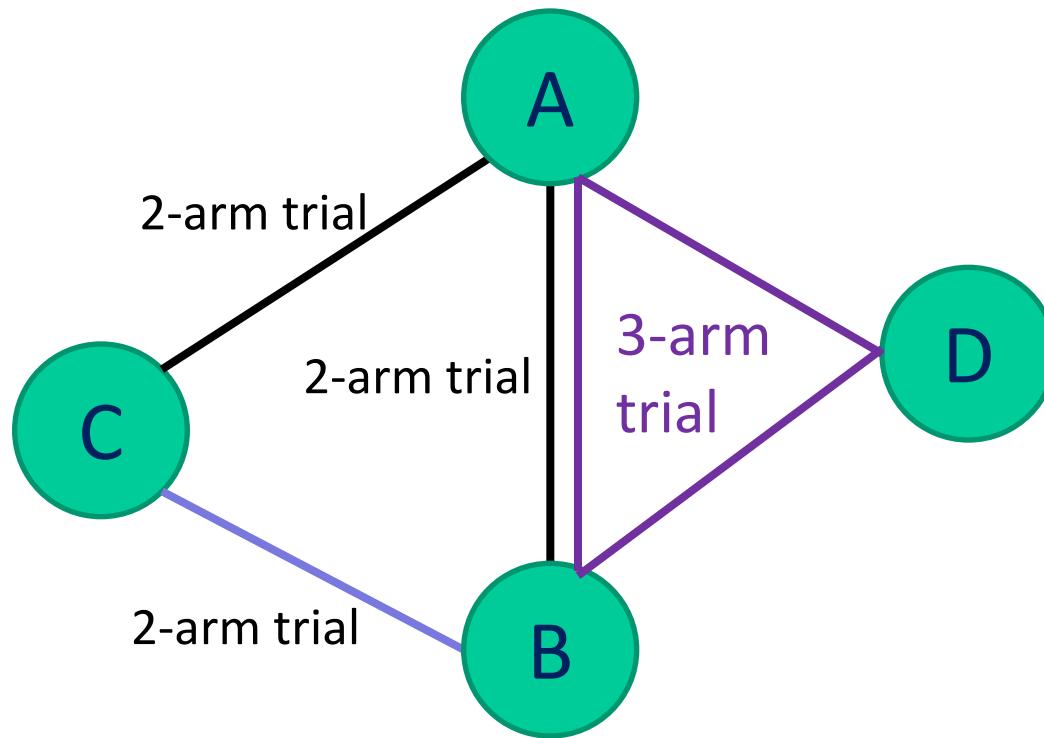
# Inconsistency

- It's important to examine the validity of the consistency equations
- A breach in the consistency equations might indicate a breach in the **transitivity assumption**
- It's only possible to examine inconsistency if we have **closed loops** in the network plot



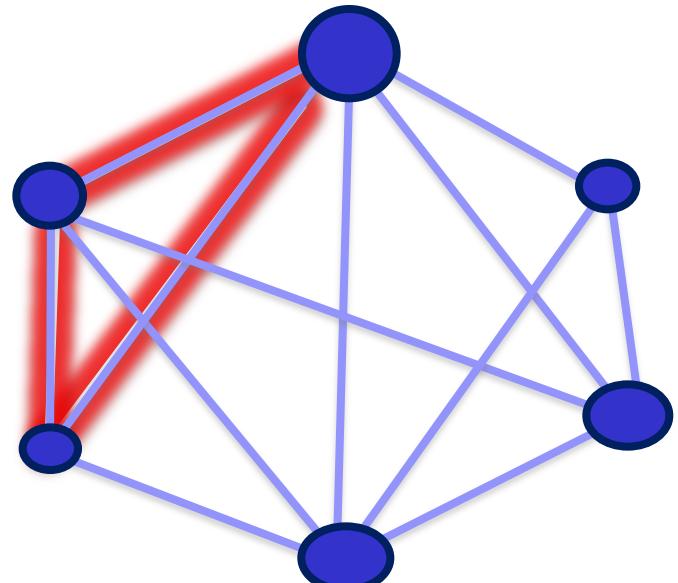
# Inconsistency in network meta-analysis

- It's important to examine the validity of the consistency equations if possible
- It's only possible if we have **closed loops** in the network plot
  - and these do not comprise only multi-arm studies

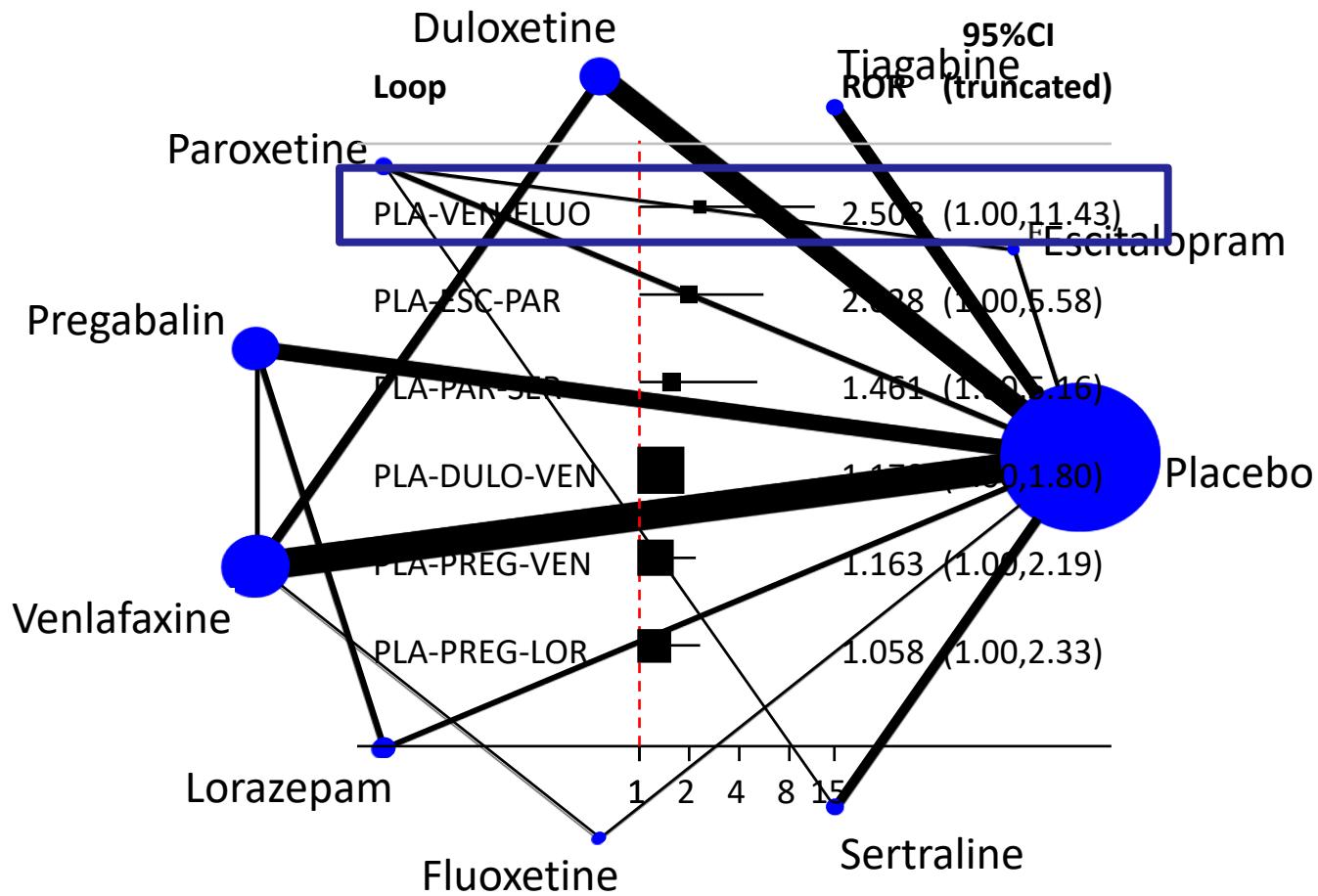


# Appropriate methods to evaluate inconsistency

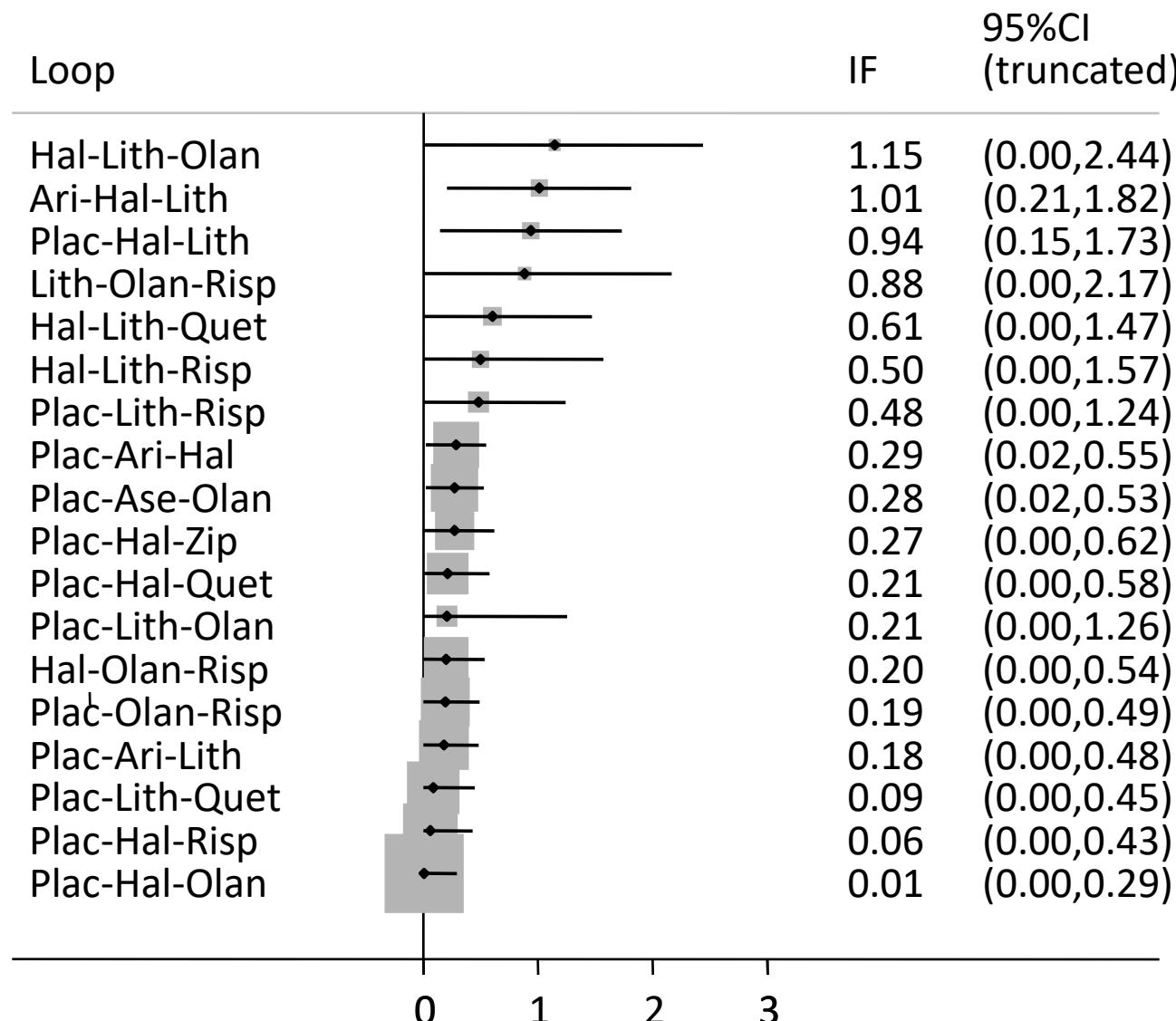
- Local tests
  - focus on a loop



# Extend this to all loops



# All loops in the acute mania data



# Loop-specific approach

Good because

- ✓ It is simple and easy to apply (ifplot command in Stata)
- ✓ Can indicate loops with large inconsistency



BUT it is problematic as

- ✓ There are multiple, correlated tests which cannot be combined to infer about the consistency of the entire network
- ✓ We don't contrast direct vs *all* indirect evidence
- ✓ Does not account for multi-arm studies

## *a detour: multi-arm studies*



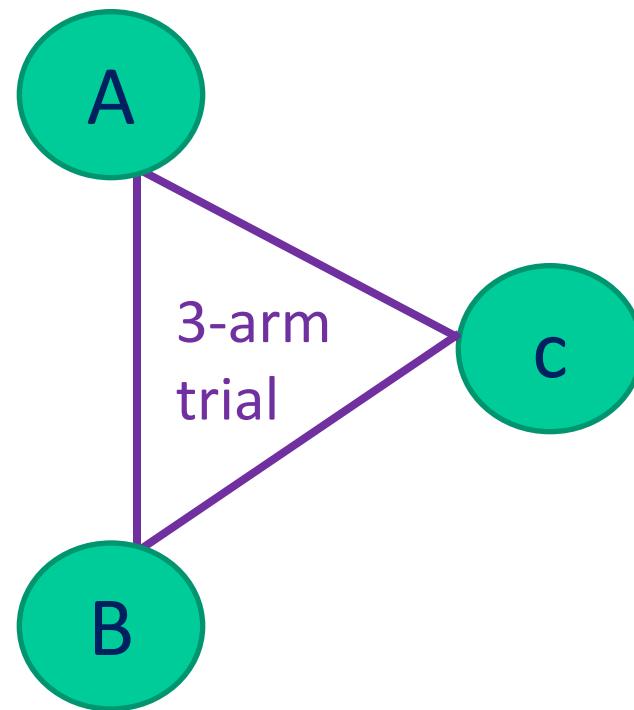
- ✓ Studies comparing more than two treatments
- ✓ Treatment effects in multi-arm studies are correlated
- ✓ E.g. in an ABC study, the relative treatment effects AB and AC are not independent, because they share the same arm, A

- ✓ By definition multi-arm studies always form loops
- ✓ But these loops are **by definition consistent**
- ✓ This **complicates** things regarding inconsistency



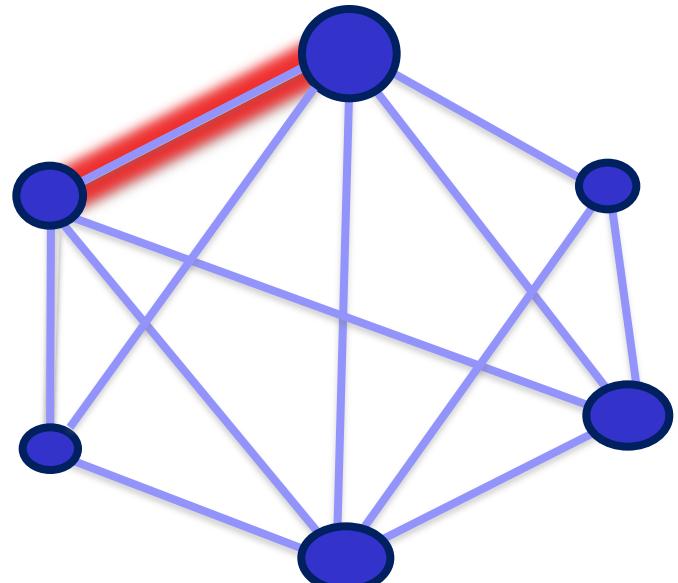
## *a detour: multi-arm studies*

- Example: three-arm trial ABC
  - Three different treatment effects can be estimated: AB, AC, BC
  - $\mu_{AB} = d_A - d_B$
  - $\mu_{AC} = d_A - d_C$
  - $\mu_{BC} = d_B - d_C$
- Consistent by definition



# Appropriate methods to evaluate inconsistency

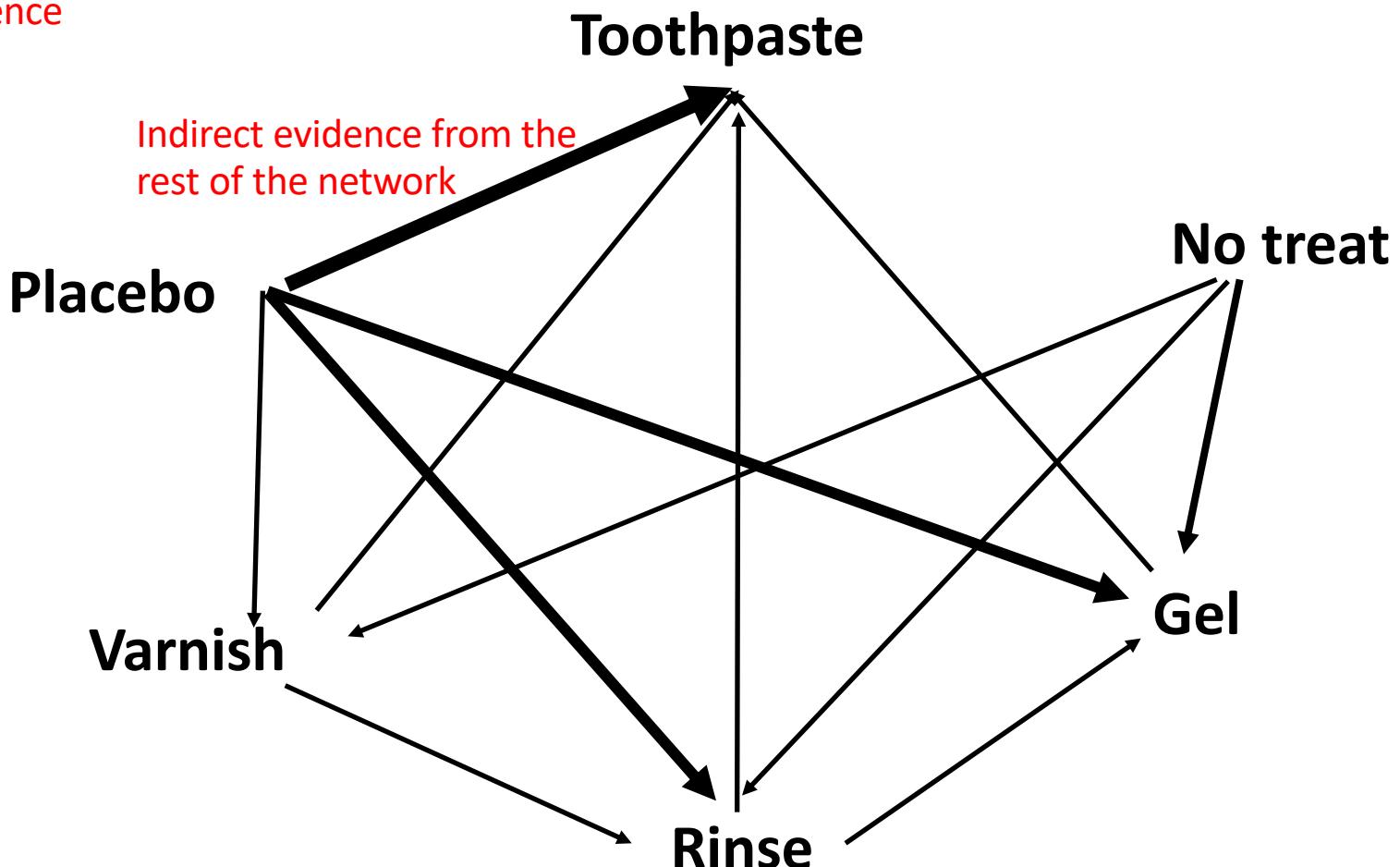
- Local tests
  - focus on a comparison



# SIDE (*Separating Indirect from Direct Evidence*)

or “node-splitting” or “side-splitting”

Direct  
evidence



# SIDE (*Separating Indirect from Direct Evidence*)

or “node-splitting” or “side-splitting”

- This procedure can be repeated for **all** available comparisons
- Good because it synthesizes indirect information coming from all the network
- Resource intensive, especially for large networks
- Does not **properly** account for multi-arm studies

# SIDE2: Back calculation method

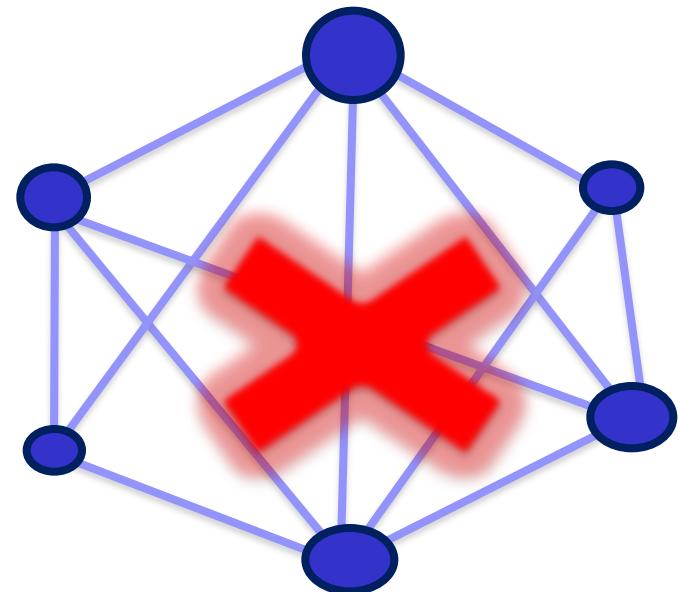
- This is an approach **very similar to SIDE**
- Using this method, for each treatment comparison we partition the evidence in the network in two independent parts: **direct** and **indirect**



Easy to use, very quick in R (`netsplit` command)

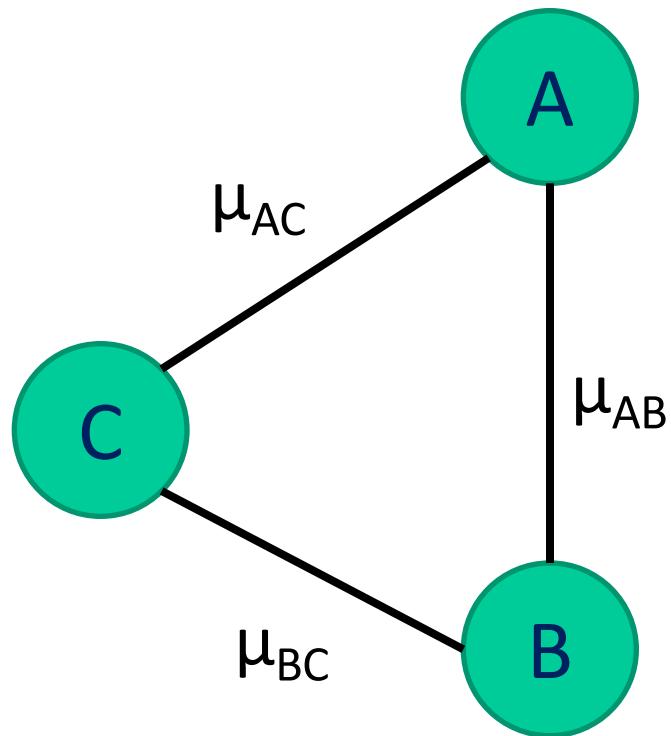
# Appropriate methods to evaluate inconsistency

- Global tests



# Modelling inconsistency

## The consistency model

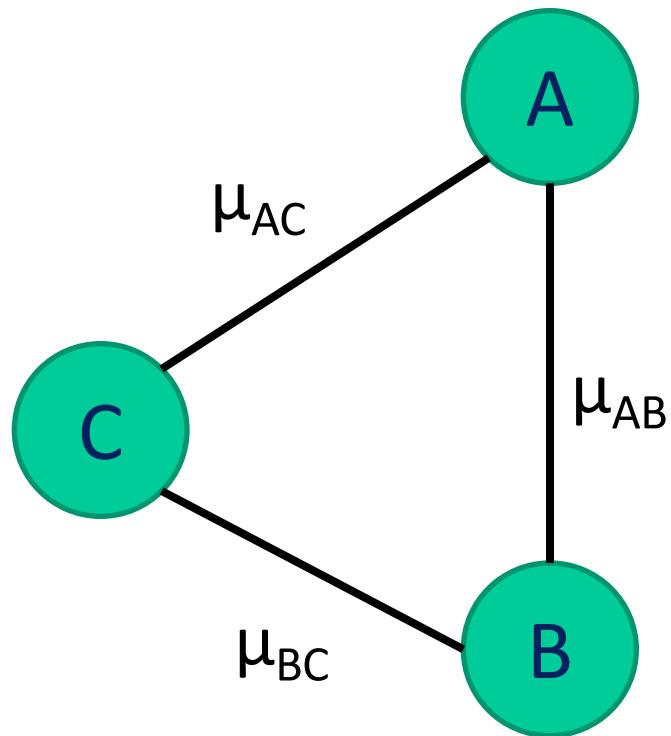


Consistency equation

$$\mu_{BC} = \mu_{AC} - \mu_{AB}$$

# Modelling inconsistency

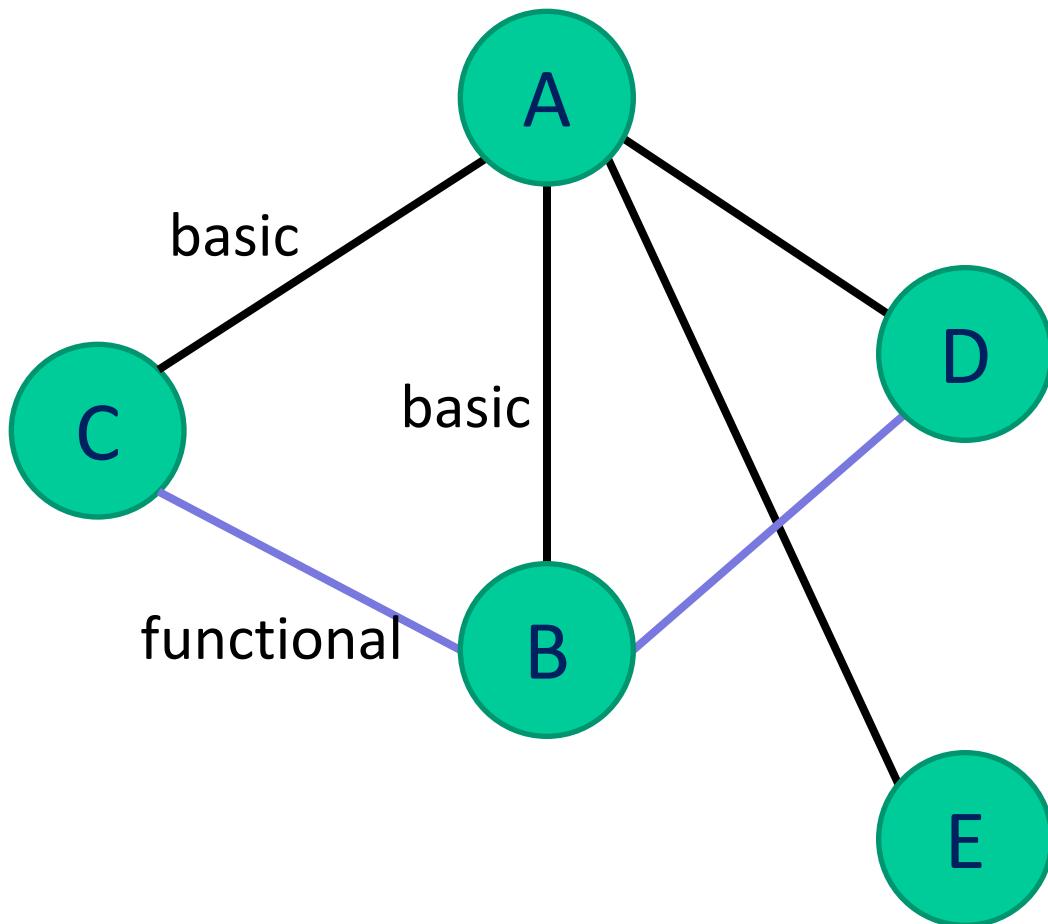
## The inconsistency model



Inconsistency equation

$$\mu_{BC} = \mu_{AC} - \mu_{AB} + w$$

# Inconsistency parameters



Consistency equations:

$$\mu_{BC} = \mu_{AC} - \mu_{AB} + w_{BC}$$

$$\mu_{BD} = \mu_{AD} - \mu_{AB} + w_{BD}$$

$$\mu_{DC} = \mu_{AC} - \mu_{AD}$$

$$\mu_{BE} = \mu_{AE} - \mu_{AB}$$

$$\mu_{DE} = \mu_{AE} - \mu_{AD}$$

$$\mu_{CE} = \mu_{AE} - \mu_{AC}$$

# How many inconsistency parameters?

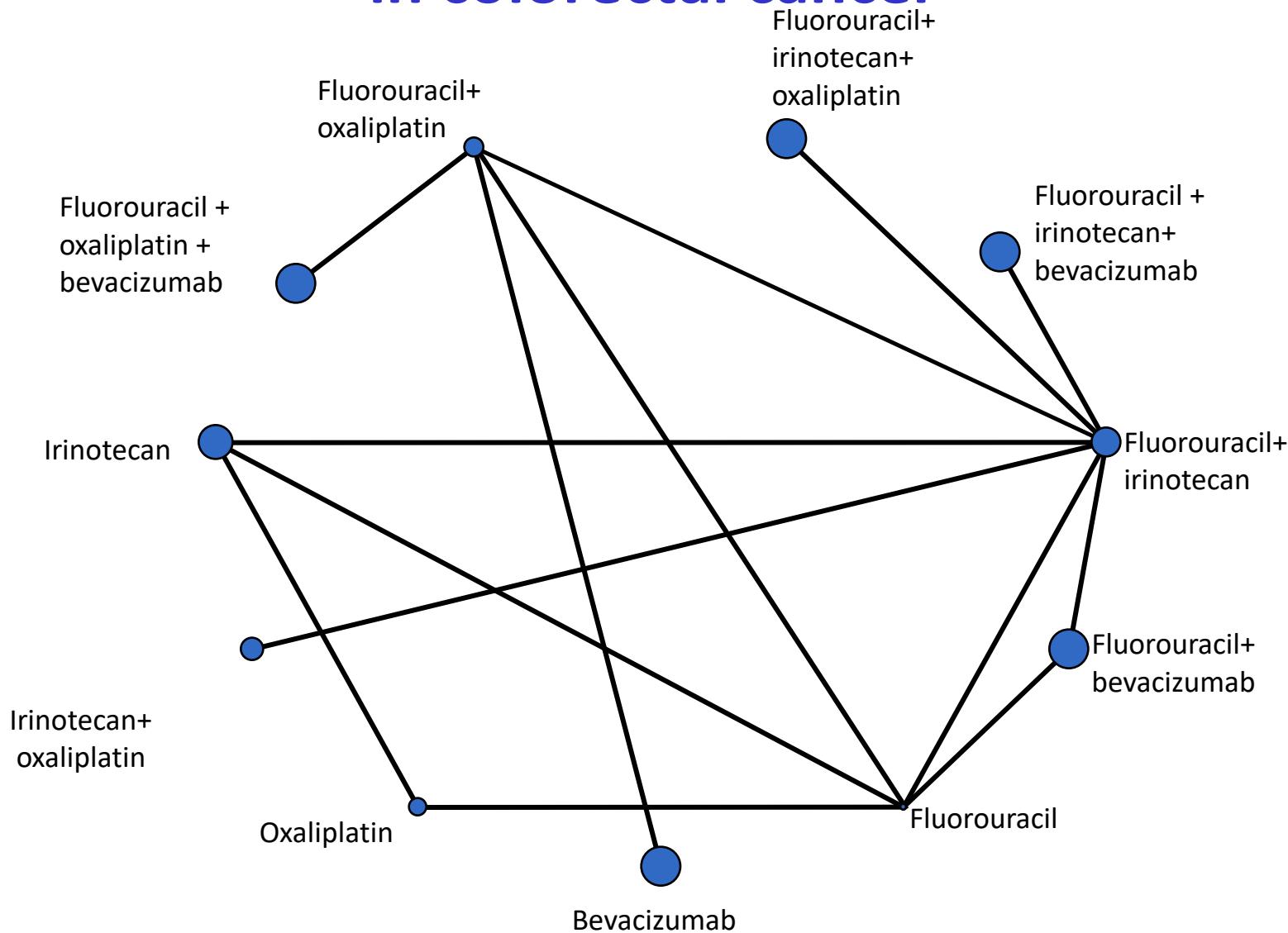
- Number of inconsistency parameters required to allow inconsistency in every closed loop =

#comparisons with data – (#treatments – 1)

$$N_{\text{comp}} - (T - 1)$$

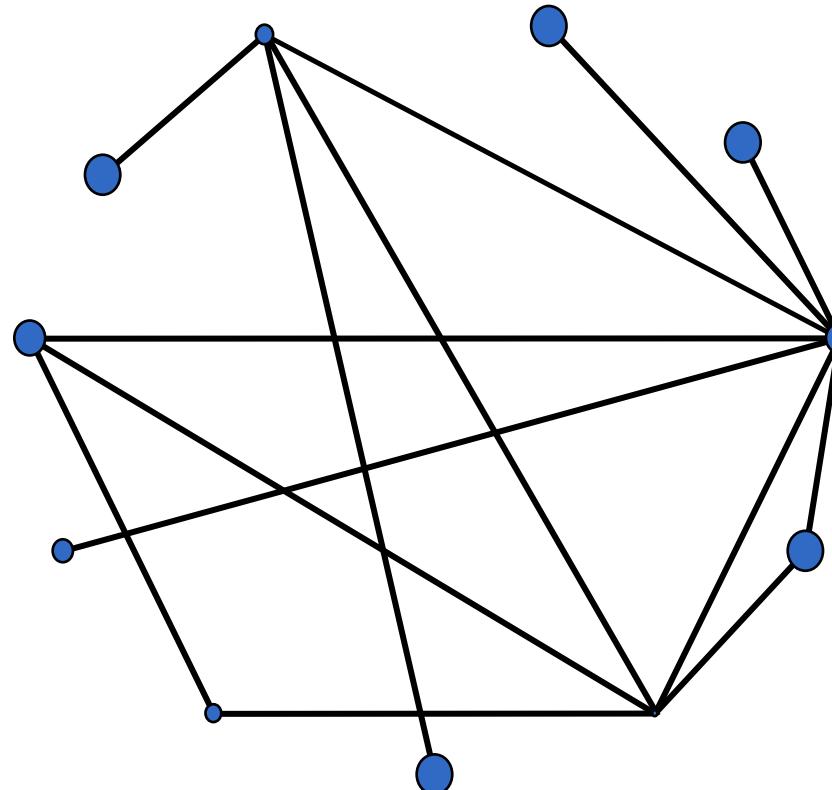
- If basic parameters are chosen such that we have direct evidence on each of them, then this is equivalent to the number of functional parameters that have data (Lu & Ades' approach)
- (Only applies if there are no multi-arm studies)

# Example: Survival with 11 chemotherapy regimens in colorectal cancer

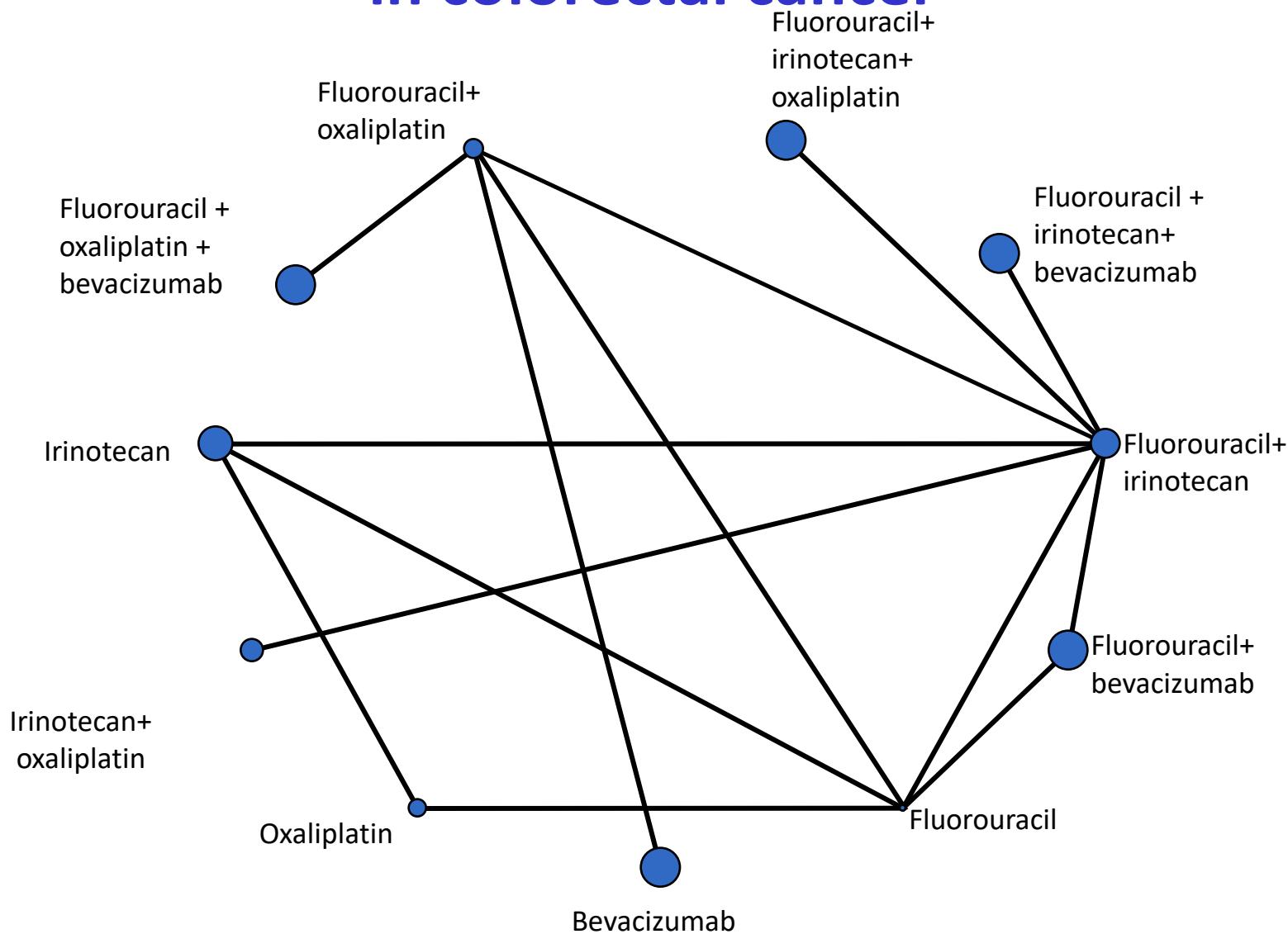


# How many inconsistency factors (i.e. closed loops)?

- A. 1
- B. 2
- C. 3
- D. 4
- E. 5
- F. 6
- G. more

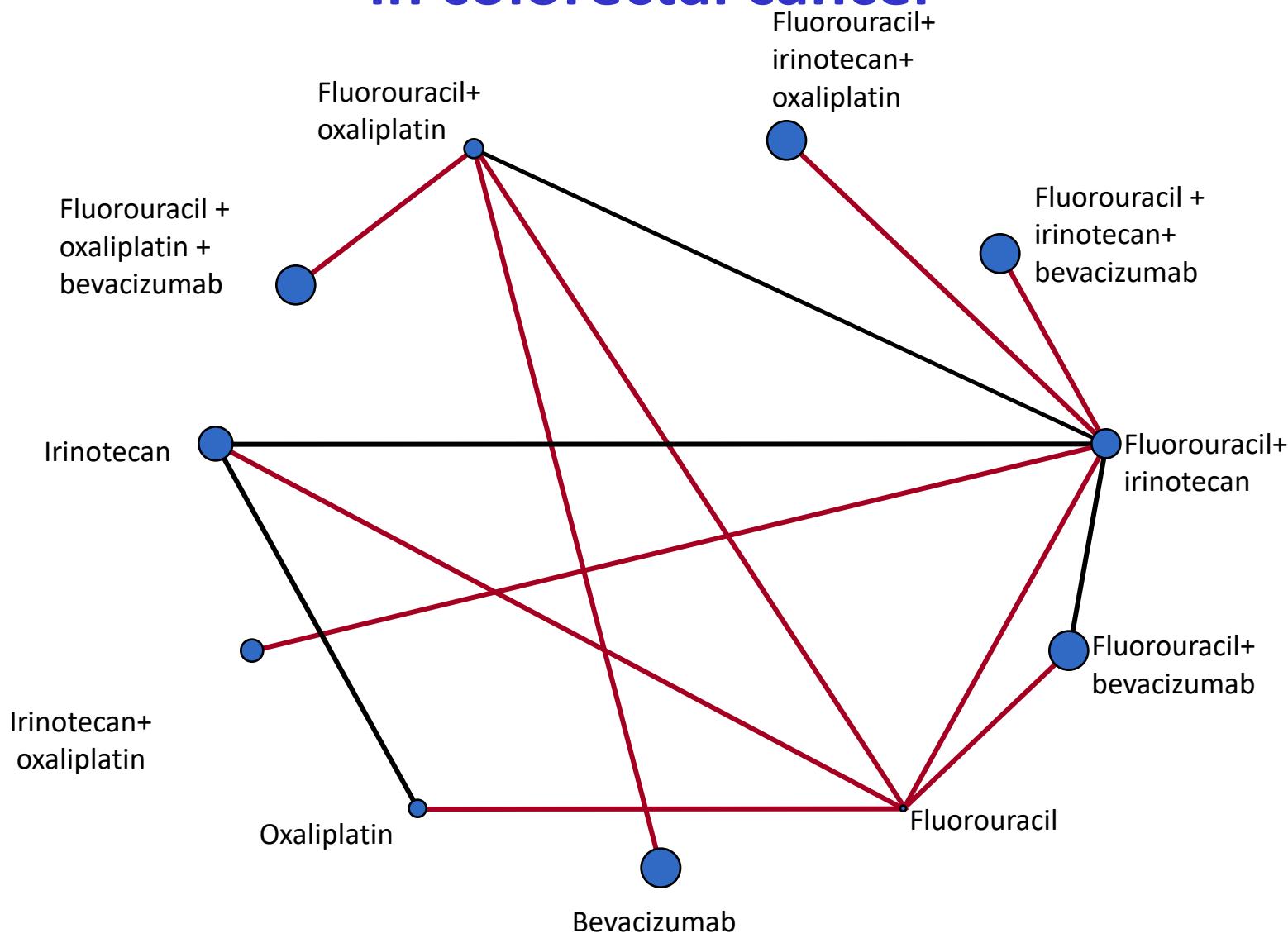


# Example: Survival with 11 chemotherapy regimens in colorectal cancer



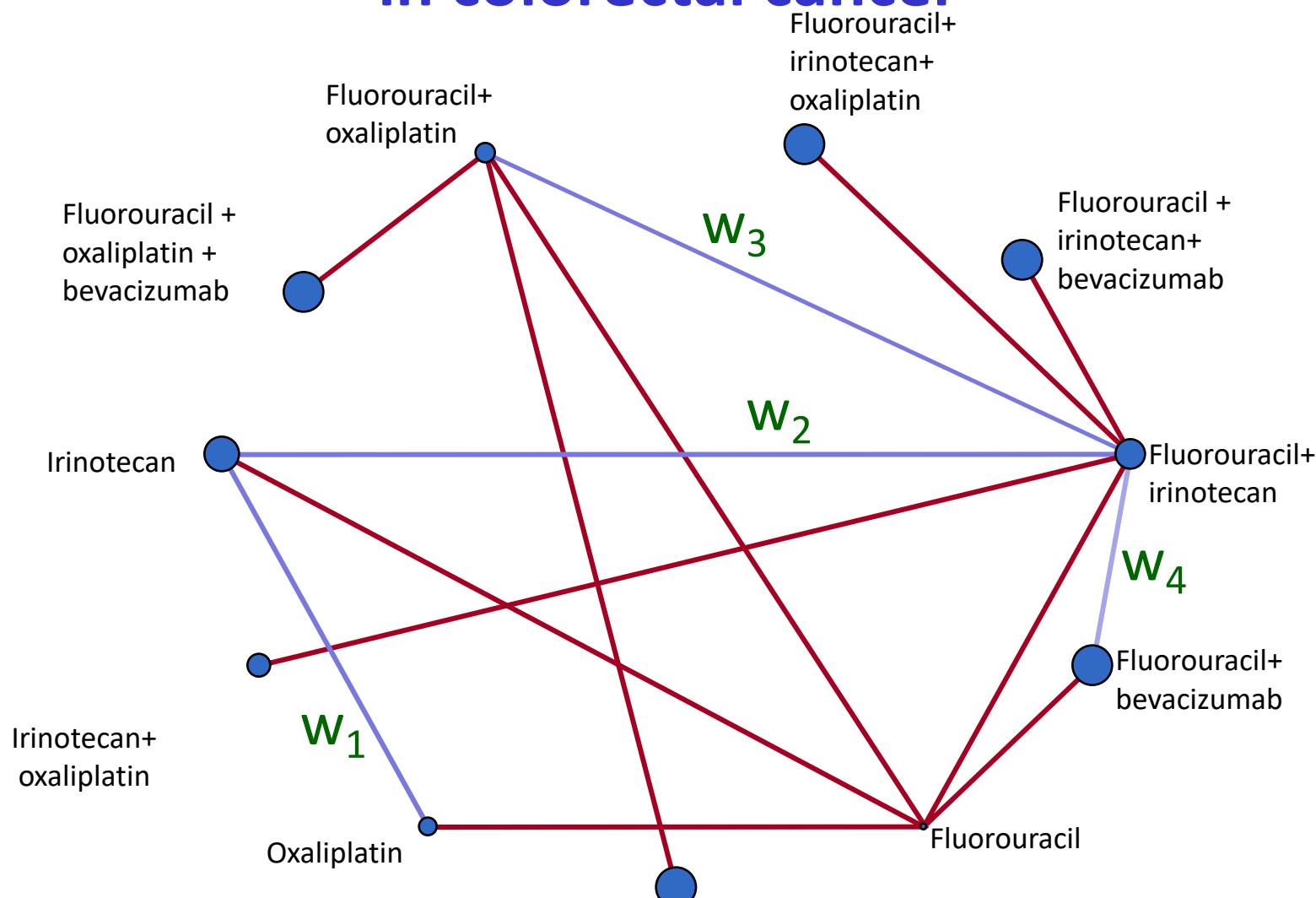
Ncomp = 14, T = 11   Number of inconsistency factors = 4

# Example: Survival with 11 chemotherapy regimens in colorectal cancer



10 basic parameters with data

# Example: Survival with 11 chemotherapy regimens in colorectal cancer



10 h

On a logHR scale the inconsistency terms are estimated  
 $w_1=-0.08$ ,  $w_2=-0.07$ ,  $w_3=-0.06$ ,  $w_4=-0.03$

rs

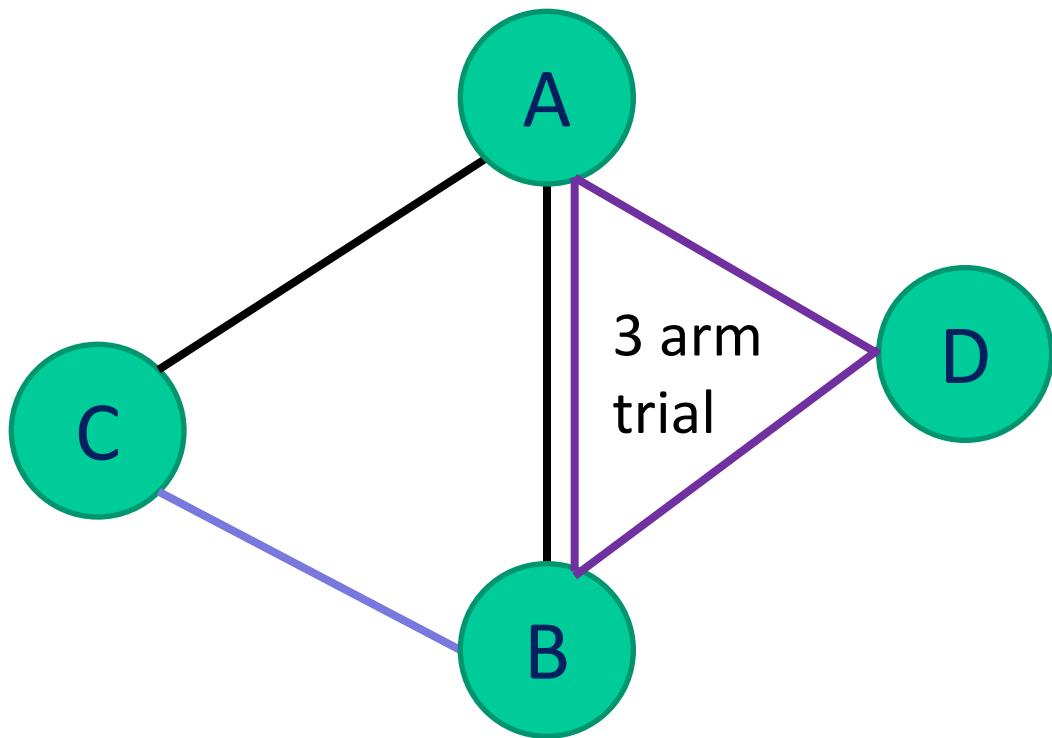
## A complication

- But what if a loop is due to a multi-arm study?
- Or if a loop is a mixture of single-arm and multi-arm studies?
- In the presence of **multi-arm trials**, the Lu and Ades inconsistency model is not uniquely defined
- Different parameterizations (choice of reference treatment) may lead to different results

# Design by treatment interaction model

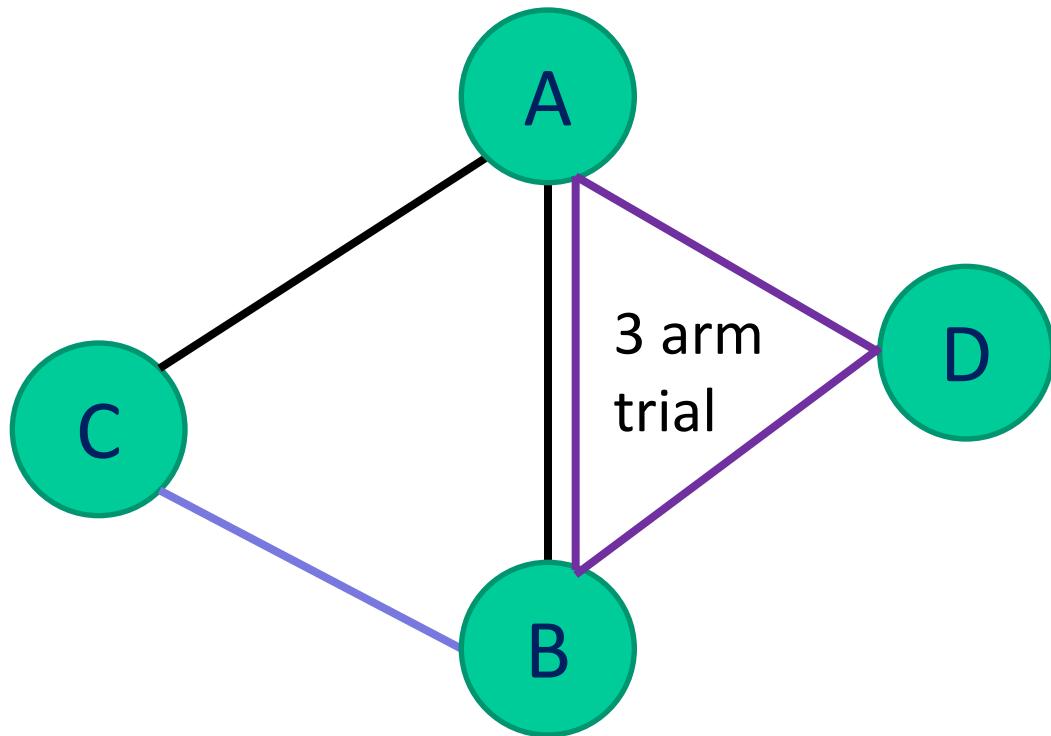
- Inconsistency can be between ‘designs’ as well as between direct and indirect evidence
- Design:= the treatments compared in a trial
  - ABC is a different design from AB or BC
- Design inconsistency: when the relative effectiveness of A versus B is different across designs
  - $\mu_{AB}$  is different when estimated in AB or ABC studies
- We then have more inconsistency factors

# 'Design by treatment interaction'



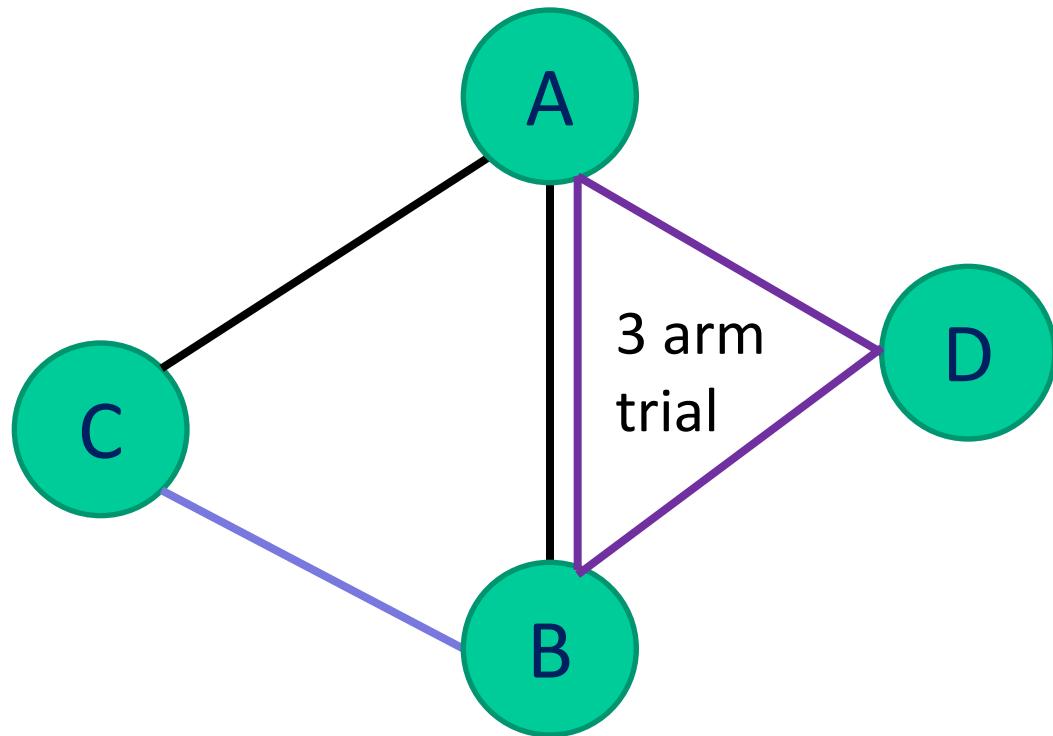
# How many inconsistency factors due to closed loops?

- A. 1
- B. 2
- C. 3
- D. 4

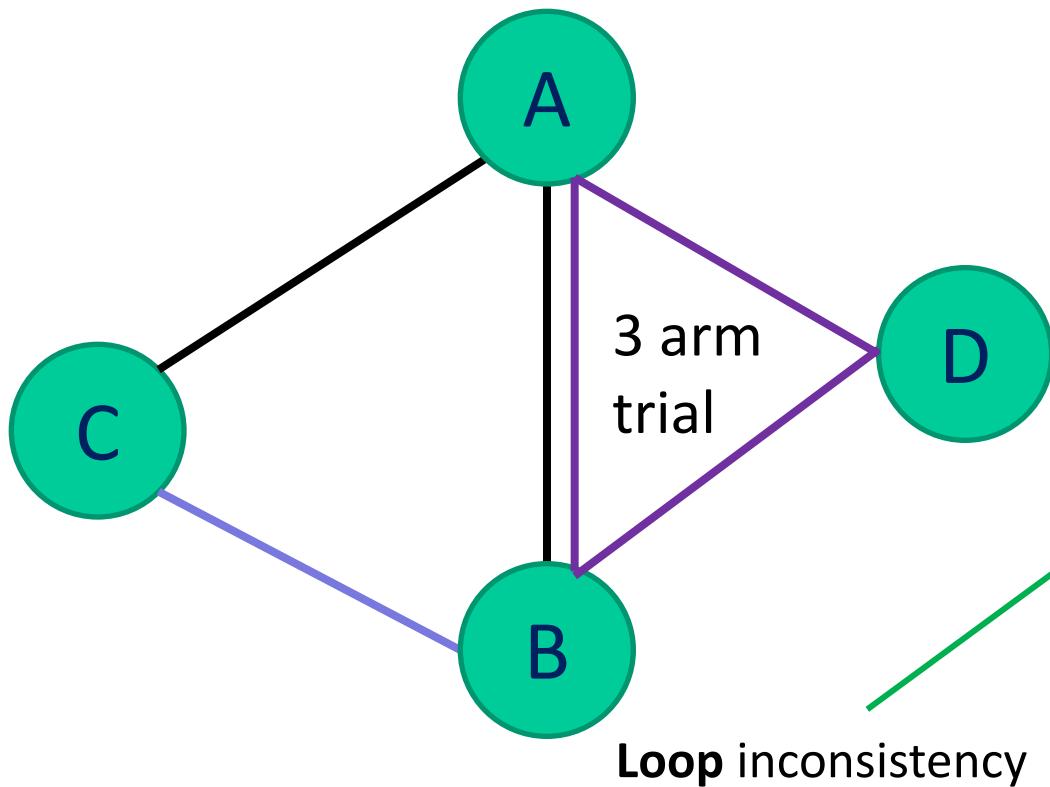


# How many inconsistency factors due to design?

- A. 1
- B. 2
- C. 3
- D. 4



# 'Design by treatment interaction'



(in)consistency model:

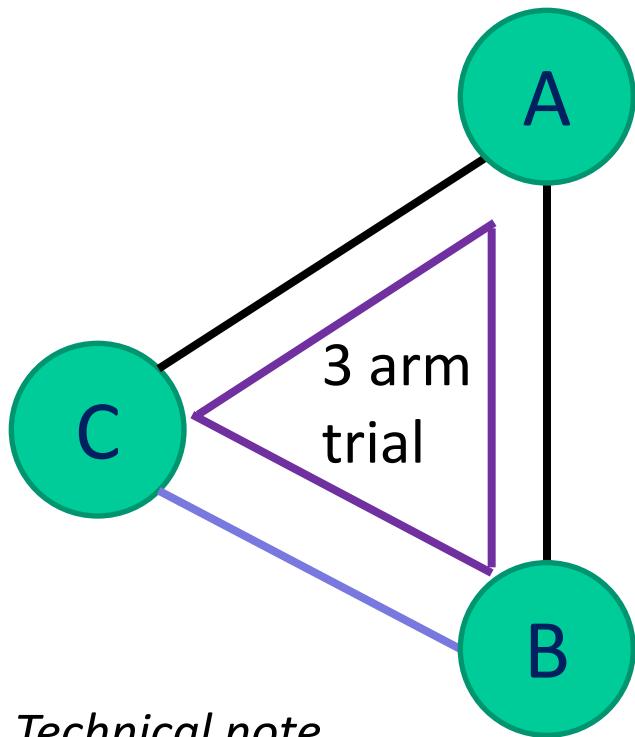
$$\mu_{BC} = \mu_{AC} - \mu_{AB} \quad + w_{BC}$$

$$\mu_{BD} = \mu_{AD} - \mu_{AB} \quad + w_{AB}$$

$$\mu_{DC} = \mu_{AC} - \mu_{AD}$$

**Design** inconsistency for disagreement between the three arm ABC trial(s) and the AB trial(s)

# ‘Design by treatment interaction’



(in)consistency model (*conceptually*)

$$\mu_{BC} = \mu_{AC} - \mu_{AB} + w_{BC}$$

$$\mu_{AB} \text{ from AB} = \mu_{AB} \text{ from ABC} + w_{AB}$$

$$\mu_{AC} \text{ from AC} = \mu_{AC} \text{ from ABC} + w_{AC}$$

## Technical note

- **network inconsistency** models add three covariates and doing network meta-regression
- there are lots of different ways to parameterize the same model

# Design-by-treatment interaction model

- Allows for inconsistency factors to represent
  - loop inconsistency
  - inconsistency between designs
- **Fixed effects:** Can interpret the inconsistency factors individually
  - this is what **network meta** does
- **Random effects:** Give the inconsistency parameters ( $w$ ) a random-effects distribution across loops
$$w_j \sim N(0, \sigma^2)$$
  - Compare  $\sigma^2$  with  $\tau^2$  (heterogeneity) to infer about inconsistency
- The inconsistency parameters can usually be interpreted in different ways

# Design-by-treatment interaction model

**Key assumption of the design-by-treatment model:**  
 $\mu_{AB}$  is different when estimated in AB or ABC studies

Is this a plausible assumption?

It might be, when the study design is a proxy for important differences

For example, maybe

Multi-arm studies are more recent?

Two-arm studies mainly sponsored by pharma?

Multi-arm studies are of better methodological quality?

Two-arm studies more susceptible to publication bias?

Other (possibly unknown) factors?

# Inconsistency as ‘design-by-treatment interaction’

## Advantages

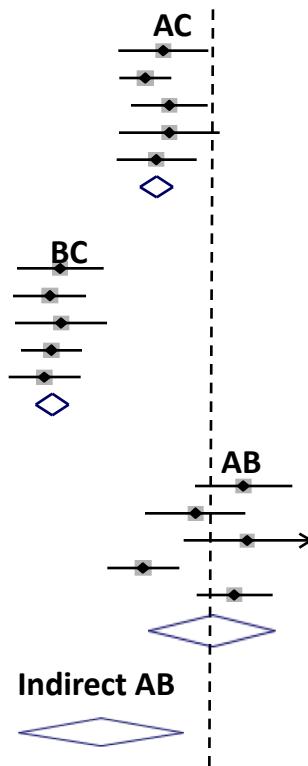
- The hypothesis of consistency in the network can be checked using a **global test**
- Unlike the Lu and Ades model, this global test does not have problems in the presence of **multi-arm studies**

## Disadvantages

- The notion of “design inconsistency” seems to be **arbitrary**. Why is an ABC trial expected to give different results than AB, ABD, or ABCD studies?
- The model seems to be driven by mathematical, rather than epidemiological considerations

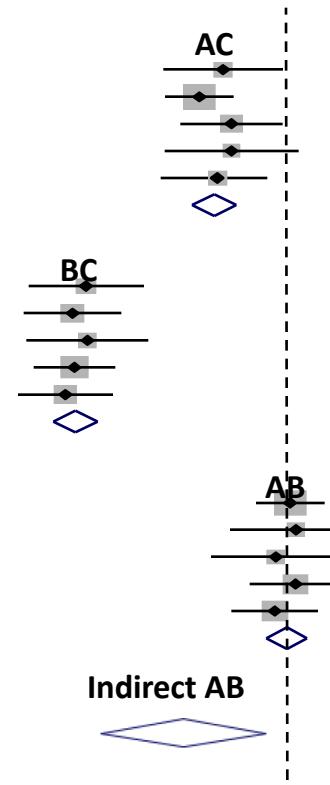
# High heterogeneity may mask inconsistency

High heterogeneity in AB



CIs form indirect and direct  
evidence on AB overlap  
**no evidence of inconsistency**

Low heterogeneity in AB



Indirect and direct  
evidence on AB disagree  
**statistical inconsistency**

# Inappropriate methods for assessing inconsistency



Inconsistency **cannot** be assessed by:

- ✗ Comparing direct estimates with NMA results
- ✗ Comparing what other meta-analyses found to the NMA results
- ✗ Comparing prior beliefs with NMA results

# Empirical evidence

- Song (2011) examined 112 independent 3-treatment networks and detected 16 cases of statistically significant discrepancies.
- Veroniki et al (2013) examined 315 loops and up to 10% were inconsistent
  - Depends on the estimator of heterogeneity
  - Inconsistency more probable in loops with comparisons informed by a single study
- Veroniki et al (2013) examined 40 networks and one in eight was found statistically inconsistent

# What if we don't find any inconsistency?

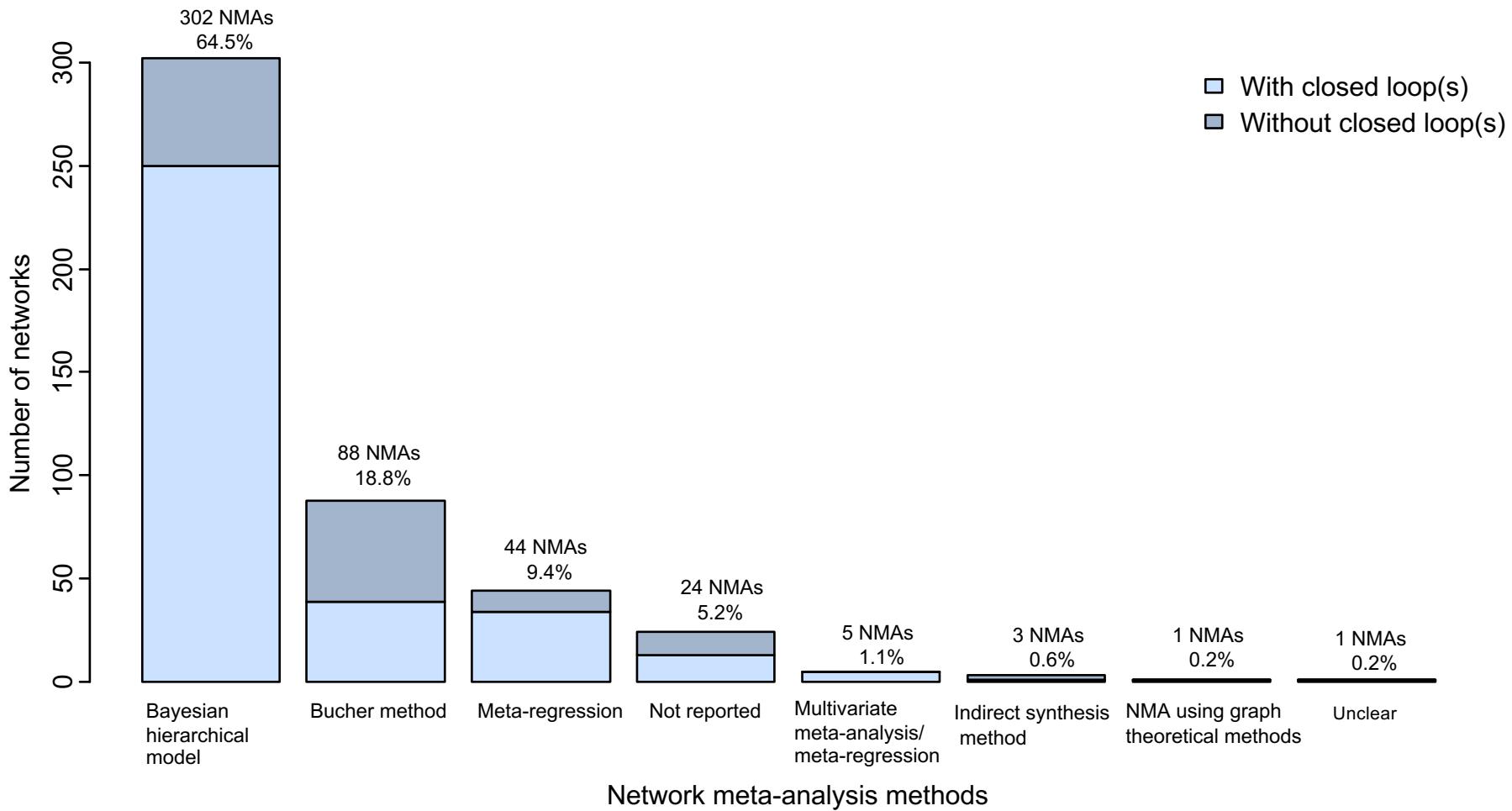
- The absence of significant inconsistency **does not mean** there is consistency
  - ✓ Issues of power and the trade-off with heterogeneity may limit the usefulness of the consistency tests
- Being unable to test for inconsistency **does not mean** there is transitivity
  - ✓ Because inconsistency can only be assessed in loops

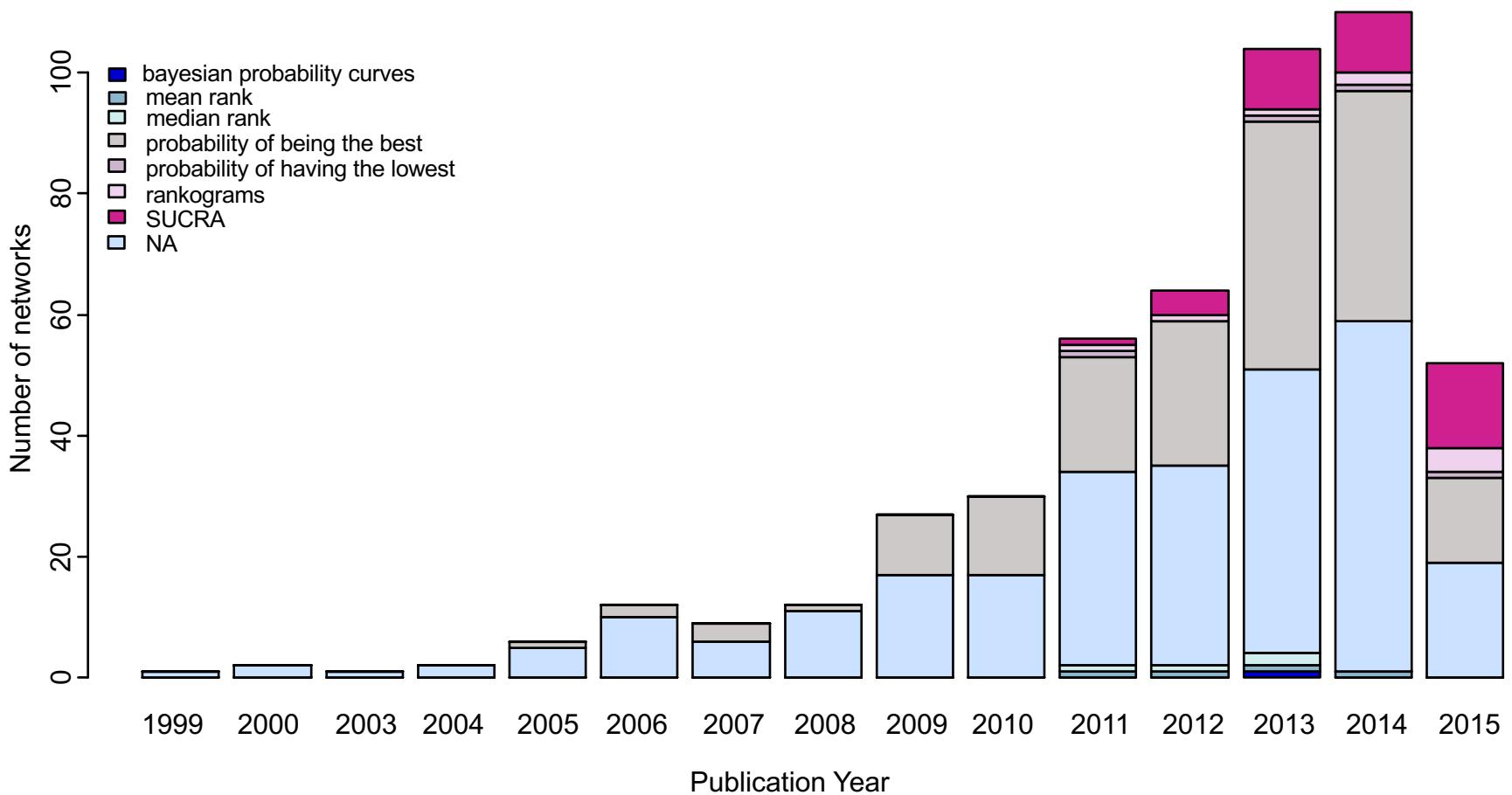
# What if we don't find any inconsistency?

- **Conceptual evaluation** of the transitivity assumption should always take place
  - ✓ Look at the distribution of effect modifiers across studies
  - ✓ Studies should always be checked for systematic differences in populations, interventions, comparators and outcomes

# What to do when inconsistency is found?

Action	Inconsistency
<b>Check the data</b>	Using simple loop inconsistency you can identify studies with data extraction errors. Inconsistency in loops where a comparison is informed by a single study are particularly suspicious for data errors.
<b>Try to bypass</b>	Empirical evidence suggests that different effect measures of dichotomous outcomes do not impact on statistical inconsistency (Veroniki et al. 2013)
<b>Resign to it</b>	Investigators may decide not to synthesize the network in the presence of excessive inconsistency.
<b>Encompass it</b>	Apply models that relax the consistency assumption by adding an 'extra' loop-specific random effect (Higgins et al. 2012, Lu & Ades 2006).
<b>Explore it</b>	Split the network into subgroups or use network meta-regression to account for differences across studies and comparisons. Specify the variables in the protocol, including bias-related characteristics.





# Exploring inconsistency

- Might consider
  - splitting intervention nodes in the network
  - removing parts of the network
  - including study-level characteristics in a network meta-regression

# Network meta-regression

- Can account for
  - Patient-level covariates (beware of ecological bias)
  - Risk of bias assessments
    - e.g. Dias et al, 2010
  - Small study effects
    - e.g. Chaimani & Salanti, 2012
  - Sponsorship bias
    - e.g. Cipriani et al, 2009

# Which of the following is correct?

Intransitivity will always lead to inconsistency

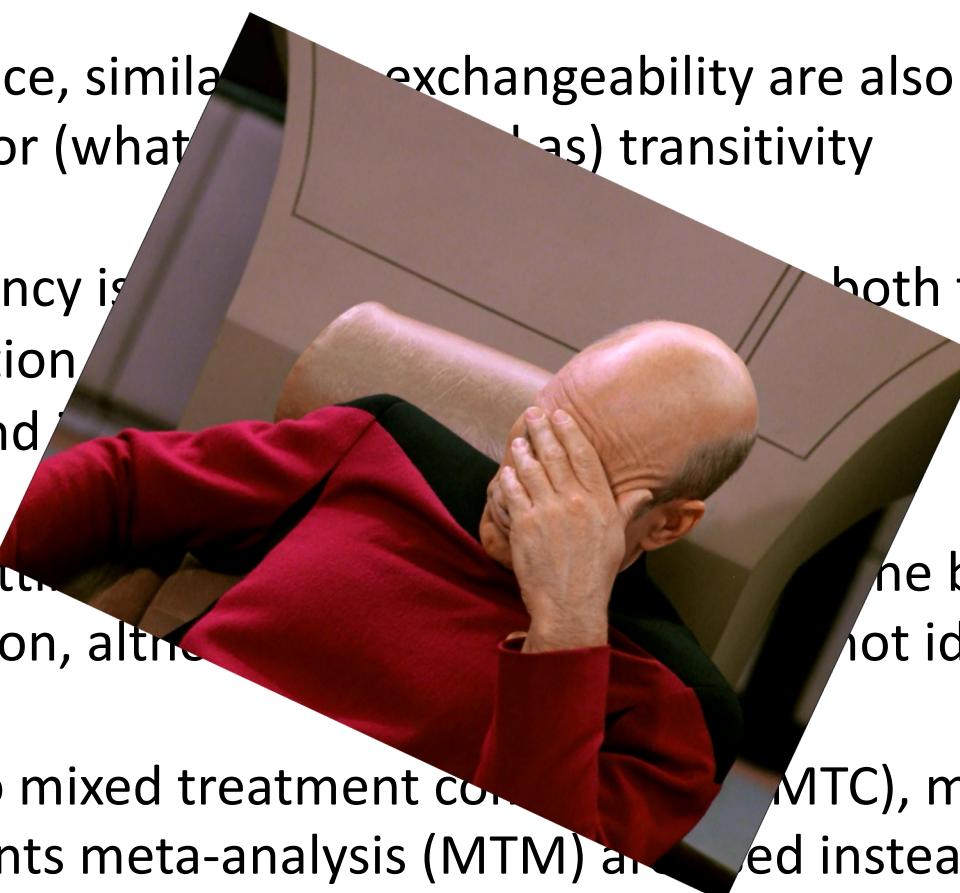
Intransitivity will always lead to inconsistency if there are closed loops

Intransitivity may lead to inconsistency, if there are closed loops

# Beware of difference in terminology

Unfortunately NMA terminology in the literature  
has not been yet completely harmonized

- Coherence, similarity, exchangeability are also used as a term for (what we call) transitivity
- Consistency is often used as an assumption that both the direct and indirect estimates are equal between studies
- Side splitting is a method to do the back-calculation, although the two methods are not identical
- And also mixed treatment comparison (MTC), multiple treatments meta-analysis (MTM) are used instead of network meta-analysis



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