

Interpreting and understanding meta-analysis graphs

A practical guide



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Ideally, clinical decision making ought to be based on the latest evidence available. However, to keep abreast with the continuously increasing number of publications in health research, a primary health care professional would need to read an unsurmountable number of articles every day covered in more than 13 million references and over 4800 biomedical and health journals in Medline alone.¹ With the view to address this challenge, the systematic review method was developed.² This article provides a practical guide for appraising systematic reviews for relevance to clinical practice and interpreting meta-analysis graphs as part of quantitative systematic reviews.

A systematic review is a synthesis of primary research studies investigating a clearly formulated clinical question using systematic, explicit and reproducible methods. The Cochrane Library is probably the most comprehensive collection of regularly updated systematic reviews in the health field and is freely accessible in Australia.³

Some systematic reviews qualify for a quantitative statistical summary of comparable study findings, the meta-analysis. While useful guides to systematic review methodology and critical appraisal of systematic reviews are plentiful,^{4–6} there is a paucity of practical guides to appraisal of meta-analysis for the nonstatistician.

This article provides a practical guide to appraisal of meta-analysis graphs, and has been developed as part of the Primary Health Care Research Evaluation Development (PHCRED) capacity building program for training general practitioners and other primary health care professionals in research methodology.

Critical appraisal of systematic reviews and meta-analyses

It is important to assess the methods and quality of the systematic review and appropriateness of the

meta-analysis before diving into the fine points of the meta-analysis results and drawing conclusions on patient treatment. *Table 1* can guide the assessment.

Meta-analysis graphs

Meta-analysis results are commonly displayed graphically as 'forest plots'. *Figures 1* and *2* give examples of meta-analysis graphs. *Figure 1* illustrates a graph with a binary outcome variable whereas *Figure 2* depicts a forest plot with a continuous outcome variable. Some features of meta-analyses using binary and continuous variables and outcome measures are compared in *Table 2*.

The majority of meta-analyses combine data from randomised controlled trials (RCTs), which compare the outcomes between an intervention group and a control group. While outcomes for binary variables are expressed as ratios, continuous outcomes measures are usually expressed as 'weighted mean difference (WMD)' in meta-analyses (*Table 2*).

The details of the meta-analysis are commonly displayed above the graph:

- review: title/research question of the systematic review and meta-analysis
- comparison: intervention versus control group; a range of comparisons may have been done in a systematic review, and
- outcome: the primary outcome measure analysed and depicted in the graph below.

Meta-analysis graphs can principally be divided into six columns. Individual study results are displayed in rows. The first column ('study') lists the individual study IDs included in the meta-analysis, usually the first author and year are displayed. The second column relates to the intervention groups, and the third column to the control groups.

- *Figure 1*: in meta-analyses with binary outcomes (eg. disease/no disease) the individual study findings are displayed as 'n/N', whereby: n = the number of participants with the outcome (eg. *Figure 1*. Adverse

Table 1. Assessment of systematic reviews and meta-analyses**When can a systematic review and meta-analysis give further insight into primary study results?**

- Existing studies gave disparate results
- Bigger study population (sample size) can increase power, generalisability and precision of findings (effect estimate)
- Subgroup analyses may be possible and could generate new hypotheses

Is the meta-analysis clinically sensible?

- Did the studies summarised in the systematic review address the same research question?
- Are the studies included in the meta-analysis of comparable quality (selection bias, attrition rates, confounding variables)?
- Are the studies comparable (eg. population, duration/dosage of treatment)?

Will the results help in caring for my patients?

- Are the studied populations comparable to my patients?
- Are the results clinically important?
- Are all clinically important outcomes considered?
- Were benefits, harms and costs considered?

effects) in the intervention (column 2) or control group (column 3), and N = the total number of participants in the intervention (column 2) or control group (column 3)

- **Figure 2:** in meta-analyses with continuous outcome variables (eg. fasting blood glucose level) the individual study findings are given as 'N' and 'mean (SD)', whereby N = the total number of participants in the intervention (column 2) or control group (column 3), and mean SD = the arithmetic mean and standard deviation (SD) of the outcome measure in either the intervention (column 2) or control group (column 3).

The fourth column visually displays the study results. The line in the middle is called 'the line of no effect', which has the value of either 1 in case of a binary outcome variable (eg. odds ratio (OR) or relative risk [RR]), or 0

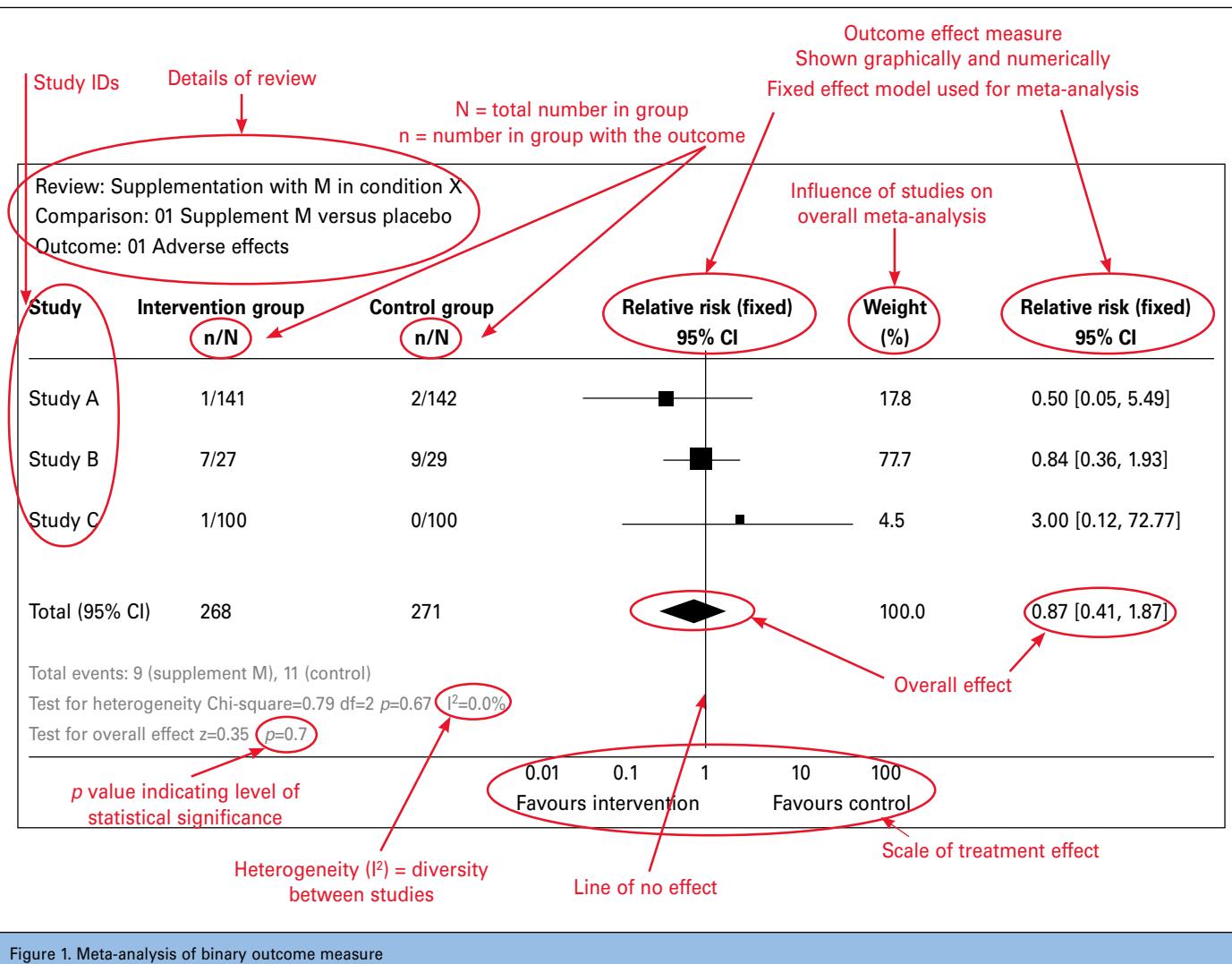


Figure 1. Meta-analysis of binary outcome measure

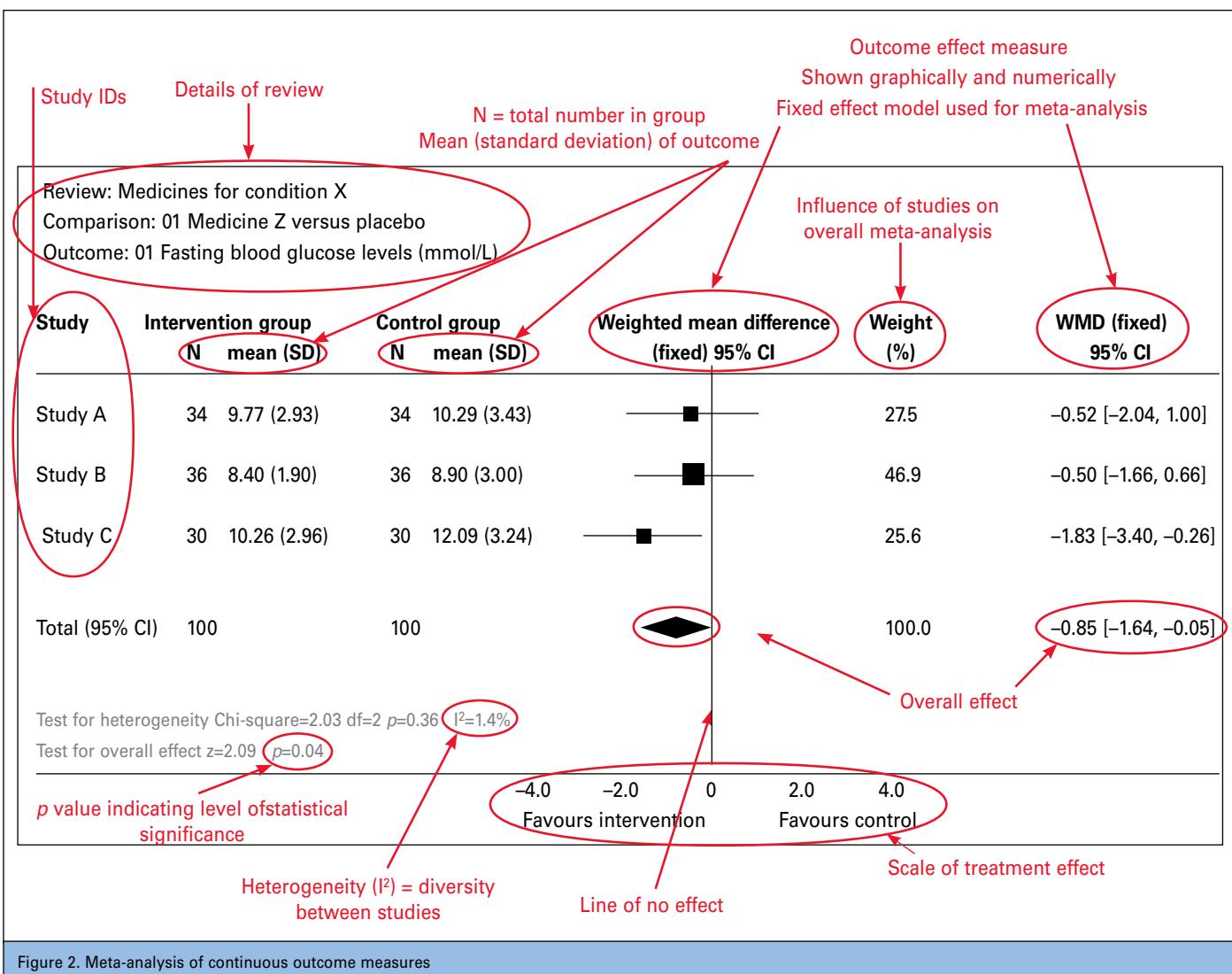


Figure 2. Meta-analysis of continuous outcome measures

in case of a continuous outcome variable (eg. WMD). There is no difference between the intervention and the control group, if OR or RR = 1 or WMD = 0.

The boxes are situated in line with the outcome value of the individual studies, also called the effect estimates (eg. OR, RR or WMD). The value axis is at the bottom of the graph. The size of the box is directly related to the 'weighting' of the study in the meta-analysis.

The horizontal lines (whiskers) through the boxes depict the length of the confidence intervals (CI). The longer the lines, the wider the CI, the less precise the study results. Arrows indicate that the CI is wider than there is space in the graph.

The weight (in %) in the fifth column

indicates the weighting or influence of the study on the overall results of the meta-analysis of all included studies. The higher the percentage weight, the bigger the box, the more influence the study has on the overall results. The influence or 'weight' of a study on the overall results is determined by the study's sample size and the precision of the study results provided as a CI. In general, the bigger the sample size and the narrower the CI, the greater the weight of the study.

The sixth column gives the numerical results for each study (eg. OR or RR and 95% CI) which are identical to the graphical display in the fourth column.

The diamond in the last row of the graph illustrates the overall result of the meta-

analysis. The middle of the diamond sits on the value for the overall effect estimate (eg. OR, RR or WMD) and the width of the diamond depicts the width of the overall CI. The overall numerical results are given in column six. The total number of participants in the intervention groups (column 2) and the control groups (column 3) is also summarised in the same row.

If the diamond doesn't cross the 'line of no effect', the calculated difference between the intervention and control groups can be considered as statistically significant. Numerically, the CI does not include 1 for binary outcome variables, measured as OR or RR; the CI does not include 0 for continuous outcome variables, measured as WMD.

Statistical significance of the overall result

Table 2. Comparison of meta-analyses of either binary or continuous variables and outcome effect measures

	Binary	Continuous
Examples for variables	Yes/no, disease/no disease, alive/dead	Height, weight, blood pressure, serum cholesterol, walking speed
Outcome effect measure	Ratios, often RR or OR	Difference between means, often WMD
Line of no effect	1	0
Treatment scale		
a) If outcome effect measure is adverse (eg. disease present, weight gain) or b) if decreased outcome effect measure is desirable (eg. lowered blood pressure)	Favours intervention on left hand side of treatment scale (ratio <1)	Favours intervention on left hand side of treatment scale (WMD <0)
Treatment scale		
c) If outcome effect measure is desirable (eg. stopped smoking, increased walking speed)	Favours intervention on right hand side of treatment scale (ratio >1)	Favours intervention on right hand side of treatment scale (WMD >0)

is also expressed with the probability value (*p* value) in the 'test for overall effect'. Commonly, the result is regarded as statistically significant if *p*<0.05.

It is important to always check the details on the value axis at the bottom of the graph, as the orientation of the outcome values is not standardised. Some graphs display the intervention to the left side of the 'line of no effect', some to the right side (Table 2). Also, one needs to be aware if the meta-analysis deals with binary or continuous variables. In case of binary variables, effect values are always greater than 0; in case of continuous variables, values can be negative or positive.

The heterogeneity test

At the bottom of the graph on the left hand side, the number of interest is the I^2 value. I^2 was only recently developed and introduced as the preferable and more reliable test for heterogeneity.⁷ I^2 ranges between 0 and 100%. Heterogeneity measures the variability between studies, in other words it gives an indication how comparable studies in the meta-analysis are. A useful visual guide to assess heterogeneity is to check the overlap of the CIs, ie. the horizontal lines or whiskers in the meta-analysis graph. Studies are regarded as homogeneous if CIs of all studies overlap.

Assessing inter- and intra-study variation or comparability of studies is important for

the best choice of meta-analysis technique or model. Generally, one can choose between two models of meta-analysis, the 'fixed' and the 'random effect' models. If $I^2 \leq 25\%$, studies are regarded homogeneous and the fixed effect model of meta-analysis can generally be used. If $I^2 \geq 75\%$ then heterogeneity is very high, and one should use a random effect model for meta-analysis.

Fixed and random effect models

Generally, a fixed effect model concentrates solely on the selected studies included in the meta-analysis, whereas a random effects model takes into account that there might be other studies unpublished, overlooked in the systematic literature search, or to be undertaken in the future which weren't included in the meta-analysis at hand.⁸ Therefore, when the research question in the meta-analysis is whether treatment has produced an effect in the set of homogeneous studies analysed, then the fixed effects model is the appropriate one.⁹

Choosing the right model for analysis is particularly important if binary outcome variables are used, as fixed and random effects models give different results. In case of continuous variables, the results of meta-analyses using fixed or random models are often identical.⁸

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