Intro to Joining Datasets

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Prelude

Joining datasets is a crucial skill when working with health-related data as it allows you to combine information about the same entities from multiple sources, leading to more comprehensive and insightful analyses. In this lesson, you'll learn how to use different joining techniques using R's dplyr package. Let's get started!

Learning Objectives

- You understand how each of the different dplyr joins work: left, right, inner and full.
- You're able to choose the appropriate join for your data
- You can join simple datasets together using functions from dplyr

Packages

Please load the packages needed for this lesson with the code below:

What is a join and why do we need it?

To illustrate the utility of joins, let's start with a toy example. Consider the following two datasets. The first, demographic, contains names and ages of three patients:

```
demographic <-
  tribble(~name, ~age,
    "Alice", 25,
    "Bob", 32,
    "Charlie", 45)
demographic</pre>
```

```
## # A tibble: 3 × 2
## name age
## <chr> <dbl>
## 1 Alice 25
## 2 Bob 32
## 3 Charlie 45
```

The second, test_info, contains tuberculosis test dates and results for those patients:

```
## # A tibble: 3 × 3
## name test_date result
## <chr> <chr> <chr> ## 1 Alice 2023-06-05 Negative
## 2 Bob 2023-08-10 Positive
## 3 Charlie 2023-07-15 Negative
```

We'd like to analyze these data together, and so we need a way to combine them.

One option we might consider is the cbind() function from base R (cbind is short for column bind):

```
cbind(demographic, test_info)
```

name	age	name	test_date	result
Alice	25	Alice	2023-06-05	Negative
Bob	32	Bob	2023-08-10	Positive
Charlie	45	Charlie	2023-07-15	Negative

This successfully merges the datasets, but it doesn't do so very intelligently. The function essentially "pastes" or "staples" the two tables together. So, as you can notice, the "name" column appears twice. This is not ideal and will be problematic for analysis.

Another problem occurs if the rows in the two datasets are not already aligned. In this case, the data will be combined incorrectly with cbind(). Consider the test_info_disordered dataset below, which now has Bob in the first row:

What happens if we cbind() this with the original demographic dataset, where Bob was in the *second* row?

```
cbind(demographic, test_info_disordered)
```

name	age	name	test_date	result
Alice	25	Bob	2023-08-10	Positive
Bob	32	Alice	2023-06-05	Negative
Charlie	45	Charlie	2023-07-15	Negative

Alice's demographic details are now mistakenly aligned with Bob's test info!

A third issue arises when an entity appears more than once in one dataset. Perhaps Alice did multiple TB tests:

```
test_info_multiple <-
  tribble(~name, ~test_date, ~result,
    "Alice", "2023-06-05", "Negative",
    "Alice", "2023-06-06", "Negative",
    "Bob", "2023-08-10", "Positive",
    "Charlie", "2023-07-15", "Negative")</pre>
```

If we try to cbind() this with the demographic dataset, we'll get an error, due to a mismatch in row counts:

```
cbind(demographic, test_info_multiple)
```

```
Error in data.frame(..., check.names = FALSE) :
   arguments imply differing number of rows: 3, 4
```





such cases will be covered in detail in the second joining lesson.

Clearly, we need a smarter way to combine datasets than cbind(); we'll need to venture into the world of joining.

Let's start with the most common join, the left_join(), which solves the problems we previously encountered.

It works for the simple case, and it does not duplicate the name column:

```
left_join(demographic, test_info)
```

```
## Joining with `by = join_by(name)`
## # A tibble: 3 × 4
              age test_date result
##
    name
    <chr> <dbl> <chr>
               25 2023-06-05 Negative
## 1 Alice
## 2 Bob
               32 2023-08-10 Positive
## 3 Charlie
               45 2023-07-15 Negative
```

It works where the datasets are not ordered identically:

```
left_join(demographic, test_info_disordered)
```

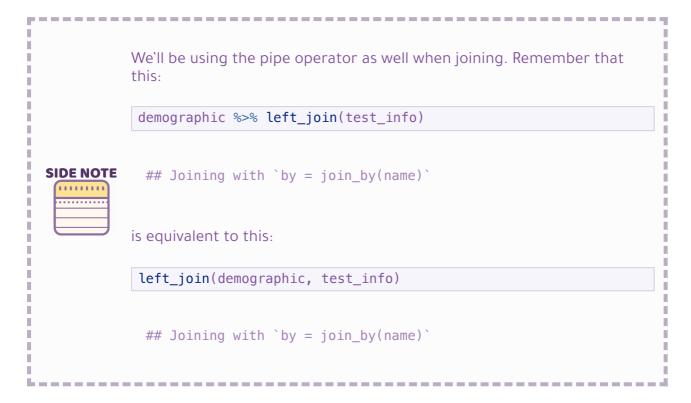
```
## Joining with `by = join_by(name)`
## # A tibble: 3 × 4
##
               age test_date result
     name
##
     <chr>
             <dbl> <chr>
                              <chr>
## 1 Alice
                25 2023-06-05 Negative
## 2 Bob
                32 2023-08-10 Positive
## 3 Charlie
               45 2023-07-15 Negative
```

And it works when there are multiple test rows per patient:

```
left_join(demographic, test_info_multiple)
```

```
## Joining with `by = join_by(name)`
```

Simple yet beautiful!



Joining syntax

Now that we understand why we need joins, let's look at their basic syntax.

Joins take two dataframes as the first two arguments: x (the *left* dataframe) and y (the *right* dataframe). As with other R functions, you can provide these as named or unnamed arguments:

```
# both the same:
left_join(x = demographic, y = test_info) # named
left_join(demographic, test_info) # unnamed
```

Another critical argument is by, which indicates the column or **key** used to connect the tables. We don't always need to supply this argument; it can be *inferred* from the

datasets. For example, in our original examples, "name" is the only column common to demographic and test_info. So the join function assumes by = "name":

```
# these are equivalent
left_join(x = demographic, y = test_info)
left_join(x = demographic, y = test_info, by = "name")
```



The column used to connect rows across the tables is known as a "key". In the dplyr join functions, the key is specified in the by argument, as seen in $left_join(x = demographic, y = test_info, by = "name")$

What happens if the keys are named differently in the two datasets? Consider the test_info_different_name dataset below, where the "name" column has been changed to "test_recipient":

If we try to join test_info_different_name with our original demographic dataset, we will encounter an error:

```
left_join(x = demographic, y = test_info_different_name)
```

```
Error in `left_join()`:
! `by` must be supplied when `x` and `y` have no common
  variables.
i Use `cross_join()` to perform a cross-join.
```

The error indicates that there are no common variables, so the join is not possible.

In situations like this, you have two choices: you can rename the column in the second dataframe to match the first, or more simply, specify which columns to join on using by = c().

Here's how to do this:

The syntax c("name" = "test_recipient") is a bit unusual. It essentially says, "Connect name from data frame x with test_recipient from data frame y because they represent the same data."

(NOTE: Answers are at the bottom of the page. Try to answer the questions yourself before checking.)

Left Join Patients and Checkups

Consider the two datasets below, one with patient details and the other with medical check-up dates for these patients.

```
patients <- tribble(</pre>
 ~patient_id, ~name,
                            ~age,
               "John",
  1,
                            32,
  2,
              "Joy",
                            28,
              "Khan",
                            40
  3,
)
checkups <- tribble(</pre>
 ~patient_id, ~checkup_date,
              "2023-01-20",
 1,
 2,
              "2023-02-20",
              "2023-05-15"
  3,
)
```

Join the patients dataset with the checkups dataset using left_join()

Left Join with by Argument

Two datasets are defined below, one with patient details and the other with vaccination records for those patients.

```
# Patient Details
patient_details <- tribble(</pre>
 ~id number, ~full name,
                             ~address,
               "Alice",
                             "123 Elm St",
 "A001",
 "B002",
"C003",
               "Bob",
                             "456 Maple Dr"
               "Charlie",
                            "789 Oak Blvd"
)
# Vaccination Records
vaccination records <- tribble(</pre>
 ~patient_code, ~vaccine_type, ~vaccination_date,
                 "COVID-19",
                                 "2022-05-10",
 "A001",
 "B002",
                                 "2023-09-01",
                 "Flu",
 "C003",
                 "Hepatitis B", "2021-12-15"
)
```

Join the patient_details and vaccination_records datasets. You will need to use the by argument because the patient identifier columns have different names.

Types of joins

The toy examples so far have involved datasets that could be matched perfectly - every row in one dataset had a corresponding row in the other dataset.

Real-world data is usually messier. Often, there will be entries in the first table that do not have corresponding entries in the second table, and vice versa.

To handle these cases of imperfect matching, there are different join types with specific behaviors: left_join(), right_join(), inner_join(), and full_join(). In the upcoming sections, we'll look at examples of how each join type operates on datasets with imperfect matches.

```
left_join()
```

Let's start with left_join(), which you've already been introduced to. To see how it handles unmatched rows, we will try to join our original demographic dataset with a modified version of the test_info dataset.

As a reminder, here is the demographic dataset, with Alice, Bob and Charlie:

demographic

```
## # A tibble: 3 × 2
## name age
## <chr> <dbl>
## 1 Alice 25
```

```
## 2 Bob 32
## 3 Charlie 45
```

For test information, we'll remove Charlie and we'll add a new patient, Xavier, and his test data:

```
## # A tibble: 3 × 3
## name test_date result
## <chr> <chr> <chr> <chr> ## 1 Alice 2023-06-05 Negative
## 2 Bob 2023-08-10 Positive
## 3 Xavier 2023-05-02 Negative
```

If we perform a left_join() using demographic as the left dataset (x = demographic) and test_info_xavier as the right dataset (y = test_info_xavier), what should we expect? Recall that Charlie is only present in the left dataset, and Xavier is only present in the right. Well, here's what happens:

```
left_join(x = demographic, y = test_info_xavier, by = "name")
```

As you can see, with the *LEFT* join, all records from the *LEFT* dataframe (demographic) are retained. So, even though Charlie doesn't have a match in the test_info_xavier dataset, he's still included in the output. (But of course, since his test information is not available in test_info_xavier those values were left as NA.)

Xavier, on the other hand, who was only present in the right dataset, gets dropped.

The graphic below shows how this join worked:



KEY POINT



In a join function like left_join(x, y), the dataset provided to the x argument can be termed the "left" dataset, while the dataset assigned to the y argument can be called the "right" dataset.

Now what if we flip the datasets? Let's see the outcome when test_info_xavier is the left dataset and demographic is the right one:

```
left_join(x = test_info_xavier, y = demographic, by = "name")
```

Once again, the left_join() retains all rows from the *left* dataset (now test_info_xavier). This means Xavier's data is included this time. Charlie, on the other hand, is excluded.



Primary Dataset: In the context of joins, the primary dataset refers to the main or prioritized dataset in an operation. In a left join, the left dataset is considered the primary dataset because all of its rows are retained in the output, regardless of whether they have a matching row in the other dataset.

Left Join Diagnoses and Demographics

Try out the following. Below are two datasets - one with disease diagnoses (disease_dx) and another with patient demographics (patient_demographics).

```
disease dx <- tribble(</pre>
  ~patient_id, ~disease,
                                 ~date_of_diagnosis,
                                 "2023-01-15",
                 "Influenza",
  1,
                                 "2023-03-05"
  4,
                 "COVID-19",
                 "Influenza",
                                 "2023-02-20",
  8,
)
patient_demographics <- tribble(</pre>
  ~patient_id, ~name,
                             ~age,
                                     ~gender,
                                     "Female",
  1,
                 "Fred",
                               28,
                 "Genevieve", 45,
                                    "Female",
  2,
                 "Henry",
"Irene",
                               32,
                                     "Male",
  3.
  5,
                               55,
                                     "Female",
                 "Jules",
                                     "Male"
  8,
                               40.
)
```

Use left_join() to merge these datasets, keeping only patients for whom we have demographic information. Think carefully about which dataset to put on the left.

Let's try another example, this time with a more realistic set of data.

First, we have data on the TB incidence rate per 100,000 people for 47 African countries, from the WHO:

```
tb_2019_africa <- read_csv(here("data/tb_incidence_2019.csv"))
tb_2019_africa</pre>
```

We want to analyze how TB incidence in African countries varies with government health expenditure per capita. For this, we have data on health expenditure per capita in USD, also from the WHO. for countries from all continents:

```
health_exp_2019 <- read_csv(here("data/health_expend_per_cap_2019.csv"))
health_exp_2019</pre>
```

Which dataset should we use as the left dataframe for the join?

Since our goal is to analyze African countries, we should use tb_2019_africa as the left dataframe. This will ensure we keep all the African countries in the final joined dataset.

Let's join them:

```
tb_health_exp_joined <-
  tb_2019_africa %>%
  left_join(health_exp_2019, by = "country")
tb_health_exp_joined
```

Now in the joined dataset, we have just the 47 rows for African countries, which is exactly what we wanted!

All rows from the left dataframe tb_2019_africa were kept, while non-African countries from health_exp_2019 were discarded.

We can check if any rows in tb_2019_africa did not have a match in health_exp_2019 by filtering for NA values:

```
tb_health_exp_joined %>%
filter(is.na(!expend_usd))
```

This shows that 3 countries - Mauritius, South Sudan, and Comoros - did not have expenditure data in health_exp_2019. But because they were present in tb_2019_africa, and that was the left dataframe, they were still included in the joined data.

To be sure, we can also quickly confirm that those countries are absent from the expenditure dataset with a filter statement:

```
health_exp_2019 %>% filter(country %in% c("Mauritius", "South Sudan", "Comoros"))
```

```
## # A tibble: 0 \times 2 ## # i 2 variables: country <chr>, expend_usd <dbl>
```

Indeed, these countries aren't present in health_exp_2019.

Left Join TB Cases and Continents

Copy the code below to define two datasets.

The first, tb_cases_children contains the number of TB cases in under 15s in 2012, by country:

```
tb_cases_children <- tidyr::who %>%
  filter(year == 2012) %>%
  transmute(country, tb_cases_smear_0_14 = new_sp_m014 + new_sp_f014)

tb_cases_children
```

And country_continents, from the {countrycode} package, lists all countries and their corresponding region and continent:

```
country_continents <-
  countrycode::codelist %>%
  select(country.name.en, continent, region)
country_continents
```

Your goal is to add the continent and region data to the TB cases dataset.

Which dataset should be the left dataframe, x? And which should be the right, y? Once you've decided, join the datasets appropriately using left_join().

```
right_join()
```

A right_join() can be thought of as a mirror image of a left_join(). The mechanics are the same, but now all rows from the *RIGHT* dataset are retained, while only those rows from the left dataset that find a match in the right are kept.

Let's look at an example to understand this. We'll use our original demographic and modified test_info_xavier datasets:

```
demographic
```

```
test_info_xavier
```

Now let's try right_join(), with demographic as the right dataframe:

```
right_join(x = test_info_xavier, y = demographic)
```

```
## Joining with `by = join_by(name)`
```

Hopefully you're getting the hang of this, and could predict that output! Since demographic was the *right* dataframe, and we are using *right*-join, all the rows from demographic are kept—Alice, Bob and Charlie. But only matching records in the left data frame test_info_xavier!

The graphic below illustrates this process:



An important point—the same final dataframe can be created with either left_join() or right_join(), it just depends on what order you provide the data frames to these functions:

```
# here, RIGHT_join prioritizes the RIGHT df, demographic
right_join(x = test_info_xavier, y = demographic)
```

```
## Joining with `by = join_by(name)`
```

```
# here, LEFT_join prioritizes the LEFT df, again demographic
left_join(x = demographic, y = test_info_xavier)
```

Joining with `by = join_by(name)`



The one difference you might notice between left and right-join is that the final column orders are different. But columns can easily be rearranged, so worrying about column order is not really worth your time.

As we previously mentioned, data scientists typically favor left_join() over right_join(). It makes more sense to specify your primary dataset first, in the left position. Opting for a left_join() is a common best practice due to its clearer logic, making it less error-prone.

Great, now we understand how left_join() and right_join() work, let's move on to inner_join() and full_join()!

inner_join()

What makes an inner_join distinct is that rows are only kept if the joining values are present in *both* dataframes. Let's return to our example of patients and their COVID test results. As a reminder, here are our datasets:

demographic

```
test_info_xavier
```

Now that we have a better understanding of how joins work, we can already picture what the final dataframe would look like if we used an inner_join() on our two dataframes above. If only rows with joining values that are in *both* dataframes are kept, and the only patients that are in both Demographic and test_info are Alice and Bob, then they should be the only patients in our final dataset! Let's try it out.

```
inner_join(demographic, test_info_xavier, by="name")
```

Perfect, that's exactly what we expected! Here, Charlie was only in the Demographic dataset, and Xavier was only in the test_info dataset, so both of them were removed. The graphic below shows how this join works:



It makes sense that the order in which you specify your datasets doesn't change the information that's retained, given that you need joining values in both datasets for a row to be kept. To illustrate this, let's try changing the order of our datasets.

```
inner_join(test_info_xavier, demographic, by="name")
```

As expected, the only difference here is the order of our columns, otherwise the information retained is the same.

Inner Join Pathogens

The following data is on foodborne-outbreaks in the US in 2019, from the CDC. Copy the code below to create two new dataframes:

```
total_inf <- tribble(</pre>
  ~pathogen,
                   ~total_infections,
  "Campylobacter",
                     9751,
  "Listeria",
                     136,
  "Salmonella",
                     8285,
  "Shigella",
                      2478,
outcomes <- tribble(</pre>
  ~pathogen,
                                 ~n deaths.
                   ~n_hosp,
                                    30,
  "Listeria",
                       128,
 "STEC",
                       582,
                                    11,
  "Campylobacter",
                      1938,
                                    42,
  "Yersinia",
                       200,
                                    5,
```

Which pathogens are common between both datasets? Use an inner_join() to join the dataframes, in order to keep only the pathogens that feature in both datasets.

Let's return to our health expenditure and TB incidence data and apply what we've learnt to these datasets.

```
tb_2019_africa
```

```
health_exp_2019
```

Here, we can create a new dataframe called inner_exp_tb using an inner_join() to retain only the countries that we have both health expenditure and TB incidence rates data on. Let's try it out now:

```
inner_exp_tb <- tb_2019_africa %>%
  inner_join(health_exp_2019)
```

```
## Joining with `by = join_by(country)`
```

```
inner_exp_tb
```

Works great!

Notice that there are now only 44 rows in the output, since the three african countries without corresponding expenditure information in the health_exp_2019 were dropped.

Along with left_join(), the inner_join() is one of the most common joins when working with data, so it's likely you will come across it a lot. It's a powerful and often-used tool, but it's also the join that excludes the most information, so be sure that you only want matching records in your final dataset or you may end up accidentally losing a lot of data! In contrast, full_join() is the most inclusive join, let's take a look at it in the next section.

Inner Join One Row

The code chunk below filters the health_exp_2019 dataset to the 70 countries with the highest spending:

```
highest_exp <-
health_exp_2019 %>%
arrange(-expend_usd) %>%
head(70)
```

Use an inner_join() to join this highest_exp dataset with the African TB incidence dataset, tb_2019_africa.

If you do this correctly, there will be just one row returned. Why?

full_join()

The peculiarity of full_join() is that it retains all records, regardless of whether or not there is a match between the two datasets. Where there is missing information in our final dataset, cells are set to NA just as we have seen in the left_join() and right_join(). Let's take a look at our Demographic and test_info datasets to illustrate this.

Here is a reminder of our datasets:

```
demographic
test_info_xavier
```

Now let's perform a full_join, with Demographic as our primary dataset.

```
full_join(demographic, test_info_xavier, by="name")
```

As we can see, all rows were kept so there was no loss in information! The graphic below illustrates this process:



Because this join isn't selective, everything ends up in the final dataset, so changing the order of our datasets won't change the information that's retained. It will only change the order of the columns in our final dataset. We can see this below when we specify test_info as our primary dataset and Demographic as our secondary dataset.

```
full_join(test_info_xavier, demographic, by="name")
```

Just as we saw above, all of the data from both of the original datasets are still there, with any missing information set to NA.

Full Join Malaria Data

The following dataframes contain global malaria incidence rates per 100'000 people and global death rates per 100'000 people from malaria, from Our World in Data. Copy the code to create two small dataframes:

```
malaria_inc <- tribble(
    ~year, ~inc_100k,
    2010, 69.485344,
    2011, 66.507935,
    2014, 59.831020,
    2016, 58.704540,
    2017, 59.151703,
)

malaria_deaths <- tribble(
    ~year, ~deaths_100k,
    2011, 12.92,
    2013, 11.00,
    2015, 10.11,
    2016, 9.40,
    2019, 8.95
)</pre>
```

Then, join the above tables using a full_join() in order to retain all information from the two datasets.

Let's turn back to our TB dataset and our health expenditure dataset.

```
tb_2019_africa
```

```
## # A tibble: 5 × 3
                           cases conf_int_95
    country
##
    <chr>
                           <dbl> <chr>
                             107 [69 - 153]
## 1 Burundi
## 2 Sao Tome and Principe
                             114 [45 - 214]
## 3 Senegal
                             117 [83 - 156]
                             12 [9 - 15]
## 4 Mauritius
## 5 Côte d'Ivoire
                             137 [88 - 197]
```

```
health_exp_2019
```

```
## # A tibble: 5 × 2
##
     country
                           expend_usd
##
                                <dbl>
     <chr>
## 1 Nigeria
                                 11.0
                               1002
## 2 Bahamas
## 3 United Arab Emirates
                               1015
## 4 Nauru
                               1038
## 5 Slovakia
                               1058
```

Now let's create a new dataframe called full_tb_health using a full_join!

```
full_tb_health <- tb_2019_africa %>%
full_join(health_exp_2019)
```

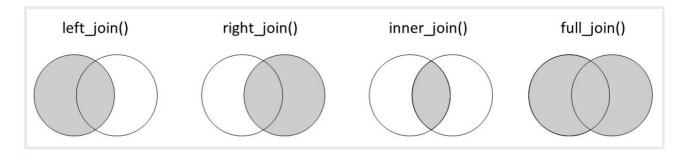
```
## Joining with `by = join_by(country)`
```

```
full_tb_health
```

Just as we saw earlier, all rows were kept between both datasets with missing values set to NA.

Wrap Up!

Way to go, you now understand the basics of joining! The Venn diagram below gives a helpful summary of the different joins and the information that each one retains. It may be helpful to save this image for future reference!



Answer Key

Q: Left Join Patients and Checkups

left_join(x=patients, y=checkups)

```
## Joining with `by = join_by(patient_id)`
## # A tibble: 3 × 4
     patient_id name
##
                        age checkup date
##
          <dbl> <chr> <dbl> <chr>
## 1
              1 John
                         32 2023-01-20
## 2
              2 Jov
                         28 2023-02-20
## 3
              3 Khan
                         40 2023-05-15
```

Q: Left Join with by Argument

```
left_join(x=patient_details, y=vaccination_records,
by=c("id_number"="patient_code"))
```

```
## # A tibble: 3 × 5
##
     id_number full_name address
                                       vaccine_type
##
               <chr>
                          <chr>
                                       <chr>
     <chr>
## 1 A001
               Alice
                          123 Elm St
                                       COVID-19
## 2 B002
                          456 Maple Dr Flu
               Bob
                         789 Oak Blvd Hepatitis B
## 3 C003
               Charlie
## # i 1 more variable: vaccination_date <chr>
```

Q: Left Join Diagnoses and Demographics

left_join(x=patient_demographics, y=disease_dx)

```
## Joining with `by = join_by(patient_id)`
## # A tibble: 5 × 6
     patient_id name
                             age gender disease
##
          <dbl> <chr>
                          <dbl> <chr> <chr>
                              28 Female Influenza
## 1
              1 Fred
                             45 Female <NA>
## 2
              2 Genevieve
              3 Henry
## 3
                              32 Male
                                        <NA>
                             55 Female <NA>
## 4
              5 Irene
                             40 Male
              8 Jules
                                        Influenza
## # i 1 more variable: date_of_diagnosis <chr>
```

Q: Left Join TB Cases and Continents

```
left_join(x=tb_cases_children, y=country_continents,
by=c(country="country.name.en"))
```

```
## # A tibble: 5 × 4
     country
##
                     tb_cases_smear_...¹ continent region
##
     <chr>
                                 <dbl> <chr>
                                                  <chr>
## 1 Afghanistan
                                   588 Asia
                                                  South Asia
## 2 Albania
                                                  Europe & Centr...
                                     0 Europe
                                                  Middle East & ...
## 3 Algeria
                                    89 Africa
## 4 American Samoa
                                    NA Oceania
                                                  East Asia & Pa...
## 5 Andorra
                                                  Europe & Centr...
                                     0 Europe
## # i abbreviated name: 1tb_cases_smear_0_14
```

Q: Inner Join Pathogens

```
inner join(total inf, outcomes)
```

```
## Joining with `by = join_by(pathogen)`
## # A tibble: 2 × 4
                   total_infections n_hosp n_deaths
     pathogen
##
     <chr>
                              <dbl> <dbl>
                                               <dbl>
## 1 Campylobacter
                                9751
                                       1938
                                                  42
## 2 Listeria
                                 136
                                        128
                                                  30
```

Q: Inner Join One Row

```
inner_join(highest_exp, tb_2019_africa)
```

There is only one country in common between the two datasets.

Q: Full Join Malaria Data

full_join(malaria_inc, malaria_deaths)

```
## Joining with `by = join_by(year)`
## # A tibble: 5 × 3
     year inc_100k deaths_100k
##
     <dbl>
##
              <dbl>
                          <dbl>
## 1 2010
               69.5
                           NA
## 2 2011
               66.5
                           12.9
## 3 2014
               59.8
                           NA
                            9.4
## 4 2016
               58.7
## 5 2017
               59.2
                           NA
```

Contributors

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