

# Are awaiting classification studies properly managed by Cochrane reviews?

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## The Problem

'Awaiting classification studies' are potentially eligible studies which cannot be assessed for inclusion or exclusion in a systematic review (SR) due to insufficient information. However, these studies may have an impact on the review's conclusion, and Cochrane authors should be aware about how to deal adequately with them. Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions recommends that all reasonable attempts to obtain information must be made before studies are definitively categorized as 'awaiting'. Furthermore, it is appropriate to describe the study details in the 'Characteristics of studies awaiting classification' table, and to mention those which have the potential to influence the results.

## Objectives

To describe how awaiting classification studies have been managed by Cochrane authors.

## Methods

We analyzed all Cochrane SRs of interventions published in Cochrane Library, issue 1 of 2019, in order to identify:

- Number of studies and reasons for be listed as awaiting classification;
- Details from corresponding authors, as missing information requested and date of contact;
- Description of the awaiting studies on PRISMA flow;
- Description of the potential impact (or not) of awaiting studies on Discussion or Conclusion section;
- Description on "Awaiting classification studies" table;
- Number of awaiting studies included after review updating (when applicable), and if the inclusion changes the review's conclusion.

## Key Results

The issue 1 of 2019 included 45 SRs, 25 (55.5%) (six updated reviews) presented a total of 107 awaiting classification studies (range of 1 to 24). The reasons presented by Cochrane authors for classifying the study as 'awaiting' are described in **Table 1**. Twelve out of 25 SRs (48%) reported the attempt to contact the authors: two SRs described the date of contact and another two reported that it was not possible to find contact details of authors. One author answered the email. One of the updated SRs included one trial previously classified under 'awaiting' and there was no conclusion change; another updated SR excluded one study awaiting assessment since the 2009, because it was not randomized. Regarding the report of 'awaiting studies' in a SR, 84% mentioned it on PRISMA flow and 88% presented the 'Characteristics of studies awaiting classification' table with reasons. Only one SR described the potential impact of 'studies awaiting classification' on the conclusions.

Table 1. Reasons for awaiting classification in Cochrane reviews (2019, Issue 1)	Number of studies (%)
Only abstract available	8 (7.4)
Separately data for mixed population	5 (4.6)
Available abstract did not provide quantitative data for extraction for meta-analysis	2 (1.9)
Age of participants was not available to see if the study met inclusion criteria	1 (0.9)
No quantitative results	2 (1.9)
Results from trial published before review publication	2 (1.9)
Trial completed but no results were published	26 (24.2)
No description of randomization process	4 (3.8)
Study likely compromised by excess loss to follow-up	1 (0.9)
Clinical trial registry (not finished)	21 (19.7)
Waiting for english translation	1 (0.9)
Unclear inclusion criteria	4 (3.8)
Reasons for awaiting classification not reported	30 (28.1)
<b>Total</b>	<b>107</b>

**We identified an inconsistency in how Cochrane reviewers deal with 'awaiting classification studies'. A checklist of the key points to manage with these studies will increase the reliability of SR, especially if the reviewers detect potential influence on the review conclusion.**



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