

***The Cochrane Collaboration Logo***

The Cochrane Collaboration logo illustrates a systematic review of data from seven randomized controlled trials (RCTs), comparing one health care treatment with a placebo. Each horizontal line represents the results of one trial (the shorter the line, the more certain the result); and the diamond represents their combined results. The vertical line indicates the position around which the horizontal lines would cluster if the two treatments compared in the trials had similar effects; if a horizontal line touches the vertical line, it means that that particular trial found no clear difference between the treatments. The position of the diamond to the left of the vertical line indicates that the treatment studied is beneficial. Horizontal lines or a diamond to the right of the line would show that the treatment did more harm than good.

***This diagram shows the results of a systematic review of RCTs of a short, inexpensive course of a corticosteroid given to women about to give birth too early. The first of these RCTs was reported in 1972. The diagram summarises the evidence that would have been revealed had the available RCTs been reviewed systematically a decade later: it indicates strongly that corticosteroids reduce the risk of babies dying from the complications of immaturity. By 1991, seven more trials had been reported, and the picture had become still stronger. This treatment reduces the odds of the babies of these women dying from the complications of immaturity by 30 to 50 per cent.***

***Because no systematic review of these trials had been published until 1989, most obstetricians had not realised that the treatment was so effective. As a result, tens of thousands of premature babies have probably suffered and died unnecessarily (and needed more expensive treatment than was necessary).*** *This is just one of many examples of the human costs resulting* *from failure to perform systematic, up-to-date reviews of RCTs of health care.*