

**Role of an External Peer Referee**

Cochrane reviews are published in two stages – the first is the protocol, which is effectively the blueprint for how the review will be conducted, and the second is the completed review itself. An external peer review may be requested to assess at either or both stages. Prior to publication, it is important that all Cochrane protocols and reviews receive feedback from specialists on the given topic, to ensure the review is relevant and will meet the needs those needing to make decisions based on best available evidence. To ensure this, after the editorial team have ensured that the protocol/review meet the essential Cochrane standards, as the responsible editorial group, Cochrane Public Health (CPH) requires the protocol/review to be assessed by at least two external referees prior to acceptance for publication. External referees are crucial to Cochrane publications. Referees and editors should not have direct financial or personal conflicts of interest concerning the topic addressed. External referees are not expected to be experts on methodologies or statistics, but instead comment on the content of the review and its relevance and application to policy and practice.

**Benefits**

The peer review process is essential to ensuring CPH reviews meet the needs of end-users. External referees therefore contribute their time to assist in developing an evidence-base relevant to their area of interest/expertise. The referee will be provided with a link to the protocol/review that they have reviewed upon publication of the work.

**Responsibilities**

Following acceptance of the external referee role, the protocol or review and feedback form for comments is sent to the external referee. The content of the protocol/review is treated as confidential and should not be shared beyond the CPH editorial group. The feedback form guides the referee through the key aspects of the review on which feedback is required. We ask referees to submit courteous and constructive comments on the review that identify its weaknesses or fatal flaws, as well as ways of improving it. The referee should return the completed feedback form to the Managing Editor within three weeks.

Reviewing a protocol typically takes 1 to 2 hours, depending on the complexity of the topic and the amount of time the referees can dedicate to the process. A review will generally take longer, as the review is obviously longer in word length, and findings and discussion of the findings will need due consideration.

The Managing Editor collates the referees’ comments with those of the other editors, sends them to the review authors, and negotiates changes to the review. The final version of the review is approved by the Coordinating Editors prior to its publication on the *Cochrane Library*.

**Selection Criteria**

The selection of external referees is at the discretion of Managing Editor and Coordinating Editors. It is not necessary for the external referee to have experience in conducting systematic reviews, rather they are selected on the basis of having relevant content knowledge of the topic area and intervention under review. The Managing Editor, may utilise a list of known previous referees for similar topics, seek new contributors from the field, or may respond to offers from people who have come to the editorial group looking for reviewing opportunities.

**Declaration of potential conflicts of interest**

External referees must declare any potential conflicts of interest every time they undertake peer review of a Cochrane review. See Cochrane's [Conflict of Interest Policy for Cochrane Library Content](https://training.cochrane.org/online-learning/editorial-policies/coi-policy/coi-policy-cochrane-library#rules). The following is an excerpt from that document, specifically related to peer referees:

**6.3 Rules for peer reviewers**

The following restrictions apply to anyone engaged in peer reviewing Cochrane Library content.

* Employees (full-time or part-time) of an organization with a financial interest in the topic of specific Cochrane Library content should not act as peer reviewers.
* Those with a direct financial interest (see Section 5.2) in an intervention or any comparators considered in the review should not act as peer reviewers.
* Peer reviewers must report any relationship with the authors of the Cochrane Review they are refereeing.
* Peer reviewers must complete the ‘Peer reviewer declaration of interest’ form separately for each peer review of a Cochrane Review. They must do so before they undertake any work on a review and update their declarations if any conflicts of interest became apparent during review.

**Open peer review**

From January 2019, and consistent with [Cochrane’s core principles](http://www.cochrane.org/about-us/our-vision-mission-and-principles) including open and transparent communication and decision making, all Cochrane groups will adopt a named peer review process.  In a named peer review process, the Cochrane review author and referee know each other’s names and affiliations. Referees will also be included on a Referees List, visible on our website ([www.ph.cochrane.org](http://www.ph.cochrane.org)).

**Data storage and protection**

Should you agree to act as a peer referee, minimal identifying information (name, email address, city, country, organisation and role if relevant, or a link to a publicly available website with this information) will be stored in Cochrane’s information management system, Archie, in order to facilitate the peer review system internally. Cochrane never shares personal data with third parties, and you can be assured that your personal data is being treated respectfully and securely. If you wish for your contact information to be deleted upon completion of the task, please email [support@cochrane.org](mailto:support@cochrane.org)

**Cochrane membership**

Your role as a referee allows you to access Cochrane training, receive Cochrane news if you wish, and earn varying levels of membership status ( see <https://www.cochrane.org/join-cochrane/cochrane-membership-thresholds>). An Archie account is created when you agree to referee a protocol or review and you are able to activate this account to access available resources and opportunities.

**Acknowledgement and credit for external referees**

The content of the external referee report is owned by the author of the report.

It is Cochrane policy that the names of all external referees who have submitted peer review comments during the current calendar year must be published on the Cochrane editorial group’s website, unless the referee has not consented to this. Lists from previous years must be archived and publicly accessible from the editorial group’s website. Referees should always be offered the option of acknowledgement in the review to which they contributed.

This document is produced to ensure consistency with Cochrane’s Peer Review Policy, for full implementation by 2019. <https://community.cochrane.org/editorial-and-publishing-policy-resource/cochrane-review-management/cochrane-peer-review-policy>  
  
Peer reviewers are requested to be aware of, and to follow, the [Committee on Publication Ethics’ Ethical guidelines for peer reviewers](https://publicationethics.org/files/Ethical_Guidelines_For_Peer_Reviewers_2.pdf).  Summary at <https://documentation.cochrane.org/display/EPPR/Peer+reviewer+conduct>