

PILOT STUDIES: PROFILING THE POSSIBILITIES

You want to do research, but may be wary of being involved in a pilot study. However, if you understand the potency of pilot studies and the important role they play in health research, they can be a fantastic way to experience conducting research first hand. Some are feasibility studies, which focus on whether procedures critical to the success of a larger study or trial are likely to be achievable. They investigate aspects such as recruitment rates, acceptability of interventions and the study procedures, testing of data collection forms and outcome measures, to name just a few. Other pilot studies can be a 'rehearsal pilot' when the procedures are mostly already decided, and are being run in a small way before funding is sought for a very expensive large-scale trial. A pilot study may inform sample size calculation for a larger trial, though effect sizes in pilot trials are usually bigger than in the full trial so caution is needed. Presentation of evidence from a pilot study is often viewed very positively by funding bodies when considering larger study applications.

Definitions are given in this glossary on the website of the National Evaluation, Trials and Studies Coordinating Centre:

<http://www.netscc.ac.uk/glossary/#glos6>

For further reading on pilot studies we can recommend:-

Lancaster GA, Dodd S, Williamson PR. Design and analysis of pilot studies: recommendations for good practice. *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice* 2004. 10(2): 307–312

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j..2002.384.doc.x/pdf>

Thabane L, Ma J, Chu R, Cheng J, Ismaila A, Rios LP, Robson R, Thabane M, Giangregorio L, Goldsmith CH. A tutorial on pilot studies: the what, why and how.

BMC Medical Research Methodology 2010, 10:1

<http://www.biomedcentral.com/content/pdf/1471-2288-10-1.pdf>

You can read more about exploratory trials in complex interventions through the MRC framework:-

Developing and evaluating complex interventions: new guidance MRC September 2008.
<http://www.mrc.ac.uk/Utilities/Documentrecord/index.htm?d=MRC004871>