



# What's it Mean?

Sorting out  
Health News

Healthcare is a fast-moving field, one that's full of exciting discoveries. For that reason, it can be confusing when we hear about the latest study on TV, the internet, or in the newspaper. How do I know if a claim is true? How does it affect me or my loved ones?

**Here are some basic questions you can ask if you're curious about medical research:**

- 1) What is the study trying to figure out? All medical research has an **objective**. Knowing that objective makes it easier to understand the study.
- 2) What kind of study is it? The best kind of trial is what's called a **randomized controlled study**. In these studies, researchers look at two groups: One group versus a control group. For example, if a doctor is studying the effects of a new drug, she may take 100 people and divide them into two groups of 50. Then she would give 50 of them the new drug and 50 of them a "placebo," or sugar pill, to compare them to. This allows her to decide whether the new drug works any better than the placebo.
- 3) How many people were in the study? The more subjects in a study, the more accurate it tends to be. A study of just 10 people is not going to be as helpful as if they included a 1000 or 10,000.
- 4) Who is the subject? It is important to know what specific group of people the researchers were looking at. For example, what age group, gender, or cultural group did they study? That helps you to figure out how closely the results may apply to you.
- 5) Who published the study? The highest quality studies are published in a **peer-reviewed journal**, which means that the research and results were carefully reviewed by scientific experts. If the journal is not a peer-reviewed one, then be very skeptical of the findings and motives of the researchers.
- 6) How surprising are the results? The more surprising the results, the more likely they are to need to **be reviewed and reproduced by future studies**. That allows us to avoid jumping to conclusions.
- 7) What are the **limits** of the study? Every good study admits its own limits and problems. It's good to ask about these limits.

Questions? Ask your healthcare provider, go to [kp.org](http://kp.org), or your doctor's home page ([www.kp.org/mydoctor](http://www.kp.org/mydoctor)) if you're looking for information about a condition, test, drug or therapy.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult your doctor.

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