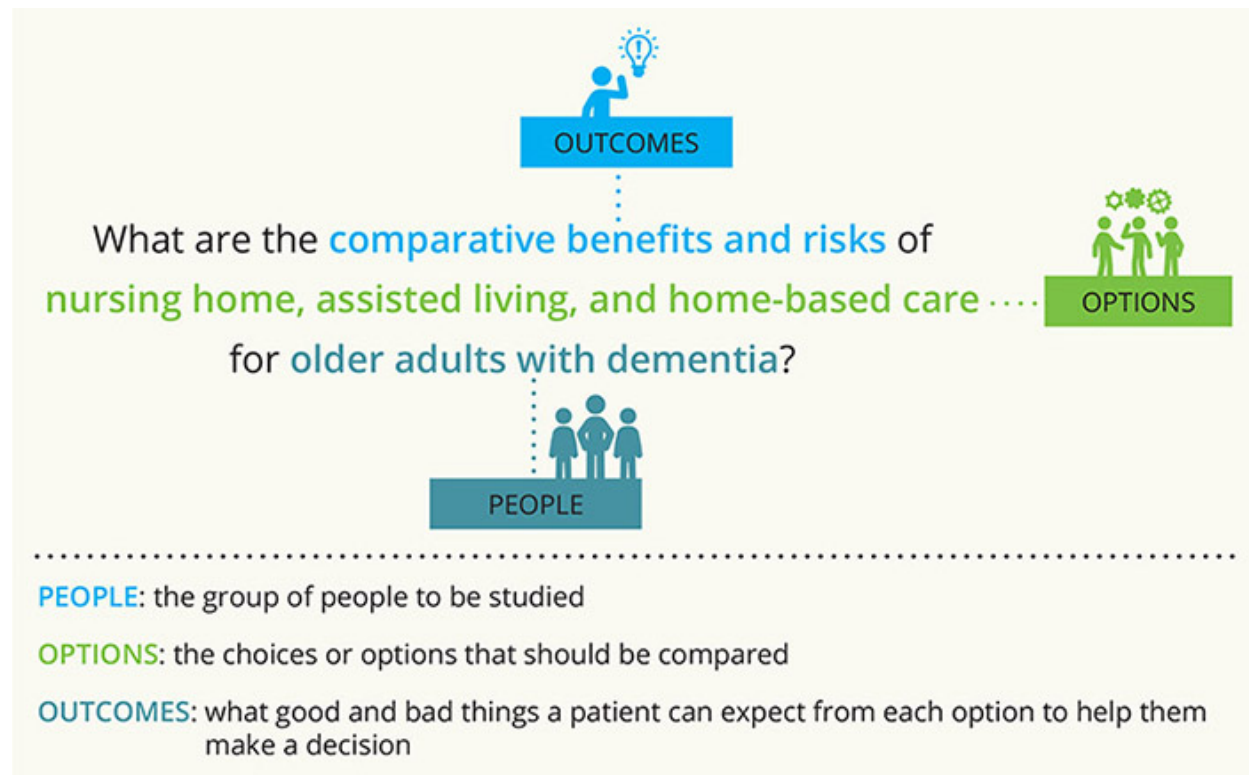


# How to Write a Practical & Useful Research Question

In order to ensure that a research question is practical and useful, we need to make sure that it clearly identifies the people involved, the options of care that need to be compared, and the potential outcomes from those options.



1. **THE PEOPLE:** Who are the people that should be studied? This is the *population of interest*.

The people to be studied may be identified in different ways. They may be:

- People living with a specific condition, OR
- People who are at risk for a specific condition, OR
- Caregivers for people with a specific condition

Examples:

- All people with low back pain
- Injection drug users who share needles and are at risk for Hepatitis C
- Parents of teenagers with mental illness

2. **THE OPTIONS:** What options should be compared? These are the *decisions the research is intended to inform*.

Options that should be compared may be:

- One or more tests or treatments for a specific condition, OR
- One or more ways to deliver the care for the specific condition, OR
- Choosing among different ways to inform people about the benefits and harms of different choices

3. **THE OUTCOMES:** How can people make informed choices between options? These are the factors that people will consider when making a decision between their options.

This may be:

- Identifying which treatment or test option has the most benefits and the least harms for the population of interest, OR
- Identifying which form of healthcare delivery is most likely to produce a specific benefit such as improved pain control

## Writing Your Research Question

- Try to keep your question as clear and simple as possible. Usually two short sentences are all that is needed.
- It might help you to write down why this question is important to you personally, who it affects, and how you hope research will make a positive change for patients and caregivers.
- Pull out the PEOPLE, OPTIONS and OUTCOMES from what you wrote to form your research question.
- Always think about other people who might read your question, like researchers or people who make decisions about what research to fund. They will need to be able to understand how your question could be turned into a study.

## What Factors Determine if a Research Question Becomes a Study?

1. **The outcomes are relevant to patients and caregivers.**

The outcomes in the question should be based on things that patients and caregivers find important.

2. **The research provides new knowledge or fills in gaps in our current knowledge.**

Research that is most meaningful provides information that was unknown before. You may want to check what has already been researched about the people, options, and outcomes that interest you.

3. **The research focuses on conditions that have the greatest impact on the most people**

PCORI is most interested in researching conditions that place the greatest burden on people, society, and healthcare. This is usually measured by how many people have the disease (prevalence); how many new cases occur every year (incidence); how many people die from the disease (mortality); how much individual suffering is caused by the disease; and how much productivity is lost because of the disease. Remember that a disease can be a high burden to society even if a smaller number of people have it. PCORI is also interested in rare diseases.

4. **The research findings are likely to be used by clinicians and/or health care systems**

The new information created from research should create new ways of doing healthcare. It may be helpful to ask yourself whether one or more major stakeholder groups would be willing to endorse the question and change their practices if the research supports a new way of doing things.

### **What Cannot be Included in my Research Question?**

**Cost-effectiveness analysis (CEA) should *not* be a part of any CER question for PCORI.** According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, ***cost-effectiveness analysis***, in the evaluation of health care, examines costs ***and*** health outcomes of different treatments. In other words, it compares the effectiveness in relation to the costs of each option. PCORI is not authorized to fund these kinds of research questions. To find out more about PCORI's policies, please visit our [FAQs](#).

*Posted: December 18, 2014 - <http://www.pcori.org/get-involved/suggest-patient-centered-research-question/how-write-practical-useful-research-question>*