CONFOUNDING AND CONFOUNDERS
R McNamee

Confounding should always be addressed in studies concerned with causality. When present, it results in a biased estimate of the effect of exposure on disease. The bias can be negative—resulting in underestimation of the exposure effect—or positive, and can even reverse the apparent direction of effect. It is a concern no matter what the design of the study or what statistic is used to measure the effect of exposure.

The potential for confounding can be reduced by good study design, but in non-randomised studies this is unlikely to resolve the problem fully. Hence statistical adjustment methods, to reduce the bias caused by measured confounders, are also frequently considered. Such adjustment presupposes that one knows which factors are confounders. However, recent literature on methods for identifying confounders suggest that these are not always obvious. Indeed, in pursuit of guidelines, authors have had to reexamine the meanings of confounding and confounders with some ambiguity and conflict emerging. This literature is reviewed and a recent modification to the traditional definition of a confounder, which emphasises causal rather than statistical relationships, is described and illustrated. Some well known problems in occupational epidemiology, arising from health related selection, are considered in the light of recent ideas.

Control of confounding through study design is not addressed, nor is the article concerned with details of statistical methods for adjustment. An overview of design and analysis in relation to confounding by age may be useful additional reading. It is assumed that the reader has at least a basic knowledge of epidemiological methods. Unless otherwise stated, definitions and comments apply to all causal study designs including case–control studies.

DEFINITIONS

Example
Consider a study of the relationship between exposure to silica dust and lung cancer where the rate of lung cancer in exposed workers is twice that in unexposed subjects, giving a rate ratio (RR) of two. The RR is a measure of the size of the effect of silica exposure on risk; here it suggests that exposure to silica dust is a cause of lung cancer. However, there might be other explanations for the increased rate among the exposed: if 50% of exposed workers were lifelong tobacco smokers compared to 30% of unexposed subjects, then this difference might explain some of the increase. This would then suggest that the true effect of silica exposure is less than two and that the result, RR = 2, is positively biased; smoking might be labelled a confounder of the relationship between silica and lung cancer. A statistical adjustment method could be used to try to estimate the true, unconfounded effect of exposure.

The traditional criteria for identifying confounders are the first three conditions C1–C3 in box 1. In the previous example, tobacco smoking fulfils all the criteria; it is a cause of lung cancer and it is correlated (associated) with silica exposure in this study population. There is unlikely to be a causal pathway (C3) linking silica exposure to smoking and then to lung cancer, since silica exposure is unlikely to be a cause of smoking. Thus smoking probably is a confounder in this study but, as discussed later, this checklist for identifying confounders is not foolproof and a change has been recommended. First, it is useful to consider the meaning of confounding, a concept which can be defined independently of the definition of a confounder.

Causal effects and confounding
Pearl' notes that “confounding is a causal concept”; it is only of interest because it is an impediment to learning about genuine causal effects. To recognise confounding, one ought perhaps firstly to understand what is meant by causal effect. In fact this frequently invoked concept is difficult to pin down, as evidenced by the variety of definitions proposed by philosophers and scientists over the centuries. One of these, attributed to Neyman in 1923, and also to Rubin in 1974, has been the focus of recent epidemiological interest since it leads naturally to a definition of confounding.

Suppose we are interested in whether an exposure over a period of time, P, causes pain in the head at a later time point. The causal effect of the exposure on a particular individual is defined as the difference between the level of pain the individual would feel if she was exposed during P and
Box 1: Confounders—old and new necessary conditions

The factor must:

- **C1** be a cause of the disease, or a surrogate measure of a cause, in unexposed people; factors satisfying this condition are called risk factors and
- **C2** be correlated, positively or negatively, with exposure in the study population. If the study population is classified into exposed and unexposed groups, this means that the factor has a different distribution (prevalence) in the two groups and
- **C3** not be an intermediate step in the causal pathway between the exposure and the disease

New stricter condition, now replacing C3:

- **C3a** not be affected by the exposure

the pain level if she was not exposed during P. Likewise, in a group of subjects, the average causal effect is defined as the difference between average pain levels. For disease outcomes, the (average) causal effect of exposure during a period of work, P, on disease incidence in a group during a period, P2, is the difference between:

- **A**: the incidence during P2 if they were exposed during P, and
- **B**: the incidence during P2 if they were not exposed during P.

In these definitions, a zero difference would mean that the exposure had no (zero) causal effect.

These definitions are clear cut but the problem of finding empirical data to meet their requirements is not. To measure the causal effect of exposure on disease occurrence requires a contrast between the experience of a group exposed during P1 and the hypothetical incidence of “the exposed group, had they been unexposed”. If the incidence in this unexposed group is equal to the incidence during P2 if they were exposed during P1, and C3 holds, then the substitution is perfect. But if it is not, the comparison will give a false picture of the causal effect of exposure and it is said to be confounded. The key issue in confounding is therefore the comparability of exposed and unexposed subjects, that is, bias. Confounders

In practice, we address confounding through searching for and controlling confounders: these are the disease risk factors which are jointly responsible for the lack of comparability of exposed and unexposed. Most textbooks to date have defined a confounder in terms of C1–C3; however these conditions are necessary, but not sufficient, to cause confounding. By “necessary, but not sufficient” we mean that:

1. all confounders must satisfy these conditions, but
2. some factors which satisfy all three conditions may not cause confounding.

One reason why factors might not produce confounding, though satisfying C1–C3, is that their potential confounding effects might cancel out. Consider the example of silica dust and lung cancer discussed earlier; suppose that, in addition to the greater prevalence of smoking in the exposed group, these subjects are also much younger than unexposed subjects. Both age and smoking would then satisfy C1–C3; however, because their potential biasing effects are in opposite directions, it is possible that these cancel each other out. If so, and if there are no other differences between exposed and unexposed, there would be no confounding. Situations where potential biases cancel out completely are probably rare in practice and so ought not to be stressed. Nevertheless a related point, that biases in opposite directions may partially cancel, and that the overall degree of confounding is determined by the net effect of these potential biases, is relevant to practice.

A more important criticism of the definition C1–C3 is that it does not fully distinguish the reasons for the association between the suspected confounder and exposure implied by C2. There are several reasons why a suspected confounder, S, and exposure, E, might be associated in a study: E may cause S, S may cause E, both may have a common cause, or the reason may be entirely non-causal—for example, selection bias. A modification of the traditional confounder definition, now accepted in the latest epidemiological textbooks, states that if S is caused by E, then S should not be regarded as a confounder. This new condition—see C3a in box 1—replaces C3 which is just a special case of it, so that the new joint criteria for a confounder are C1, C2, and C3a.

The introduction of C3a reflects a growing understanding that reliance on purely statistical rules, as opposed to rules defined by causal relationships, can lead to some factors being wrongly labelled as confounders; furthermore, standard statistical adjustments for such factors could produce bias rather than remove it. Figure 1 uses “causal graphs” to illustrate how use of C3a can avoid these mistakes. In causal graphs, an arrow from one variable to another variable indicates that the former is a cause of the latter; likewise, a chain of unidirectional arrows implies a causal relationship.

In fig 1A the suspected confounder S lies on the causal pathway between E and disease, D; S is part of the mechanism whereby E causes D. Application of criterion C3a—or C3—tells us that S is not a confounder and we should not “adjust” for it. Suppose that shift work (E) causes cardiovascular disease (D) by impairing glucose tolerance and consider a study of the E–D association in which glucose tolerance was measured five years after shift work began (S). If fig 1A correctly portrays these relationships, then adjustment for S would be wrong. Note that E→S implies only that shift work is a cause of glucose intolerance, not the only cause. As a counter example, consider the same study but with glucose tolerance measured before workers took up shift work: now fig 1A is inappropriate since the relationship E→S cannot be true. In this case, S
A. The intermediate variable scenario

B. Suspected confounder is affected by both exposure and disease

C. Suspected factor and disease have a common cause which is affected by exposure

Figure 1 Causal diagrams where suspected factor, S, is affected by exposure and therefore not a confounder. E and D are respectively the exposure and disease whose relationship is under study; S is the (false) suspected confounder; A is a common cause of S and D.

Empirical evidence of confounding: internal versus external evidence

The last section stressed the need to address causal relationships when searching for confounders. But this very aspect can lead to difficulties in the practice of identifying confounders since causality cannot be established from data alone. In grappling with this problem, it is useful to distinguish between two types of evidence: internal, statistical evidence from the “data at hand”, and external evidence such as prior research and prior beliefs. The relative importance of these two sources, especially if they appear to conflict, needs to be established for each of the criteria C1–C3a.

Suppose that data on disease, D, and a potential confounder, S, are available and consider the evidence that S is a cause of D. If D were lung cancer and S tobacco smoking then, regardless of what the data at hand showed, one would regard tobacco smoking as a risk factor for lung cancer because of strong external evidence. If instead S were “match carrying”, it would be rejected as a risk factor, despite what the data might suggest, because of a strong belief that a causal relationship is implausible. These examples illustrate that strong external evidence about C1 can override internal evidence: what matters is the true causal relationship between S and disease, not how that relationship appears in the data at hand.

Sometimes there is little or no prior evidence about the causal effect of S so that there is more reliance on internal data. It is important to recognise that data based evidence, about whether S is a risk factor, may itself suffer from confounding. For example, a crude analysis might show an association between alcohol consumption, S, and lung cancer when in reality there is no causal relationship: the apparent association could be due to confounding by smoking. To see whether alcohol is truly a risk factor, one would need to adjust for smoking. In general, the decision as to whether S is a risk factor for D should be based on suitably adjusted associations.
Degree of confounding

Strictly speaking any difference in the prevalence of a risk factor between exposed and unexposed is evidence of C2, but small differences may be unimportant in practice. What matters is the degree of confounding which this difference produces. Suppose the relationship between exposure and disease is measured by a relative risk (RR). The degree of confounding is defined here as the ratio of the measured, confounded RR divided by the true, unconfounded RR. If there is only a single confounder S which is a dichotomous variable either present or absent (for example, genotype), then the degree of confounding depends on:

1. the strength of the relationship between S and disease; this could be measured by RR_s, the ratio of disease risks when S is present and S is absent
2. the percentages of subjects with S in the exposed and unexposed groups, p_1 and p_0 say.

It can be calculated as follows:

\[
\frac{\text{confounded RR}}{\text{true RR}} = \frac{(100 - p_1) + RR_p p_1}{(100 - p_0) + RR_p p_0}
\]

Table 1 illustrates the formula for a confounder S for which RR_p is 5; the percentages of subjects with S in the exposed and unexposed populations vary across the table. For example, if 50% and 30% of the exposed and unexposed population have S, then the confounded RR will be 1.4 times the true value. If the figures for exposed and unexposed are reversed, then the confounded RR will be 0.7 times the true value. This formula may be useful in situations where it has not been possible to measure an important confounder; the figures p_1 and p_0 will then be unknown but the formula can be used to evaluate the implications of educated guesses.

In general, a test of the “statistical significance” of the difference between p_1 and p_0 should not be used to assess the degree of confounding, as this could lead to important differences being ignored. For example, in a study comparing respiratory symptoms in two groups each with 40 subjects, the fact that 30% of one group and 50% of the other are smokers could produce a fair degree of confounding if smoking is a strong risk factor (RR = 5, say). However, the difference between p_1 and p_0 is not “statistically significant at the 5% level”.

Table 1 Degree of confounding of an exposure–disease relationship by a risk factor S

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage with S (exposed group)</th>
<th>10%</th>
<th>20%</th>
<th>30%</th>
<th>40%</th>
<th>50%</th>
<th>60%</th>
<th>70%</th>
<th>80%</th>
<th>90%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage with S (unexposed group)</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10%</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>20%</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>30%</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40%</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>50%</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>60%</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>70%</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>80%</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.5</td>
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<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>90%</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
In practice, the effect of selection bias and confounding are the same—that is, bias—and the territorial overlap need not be a concern provided it is acknowledged. As a matter of theory, the definition of confounding in box 2 is sufficiently broad to encompass all bias in the selection of exposed and unexposed subjects. Nevertheless, the term “selection bias” remains a useful shorthand for certain types of problem.

Comparisons of workers with the general population: net effect of confounders

Besides age, the factors commonly addressed as confounders in occupational epidemiology include so-called lifestyle risk factors and concomitant occupational “exposures” other than that under investigation. When comparing an industrial cohort with the general population, we might expect that the bias due to these factors alone would be positive, since industrial workers often have less favourable lifestyles, both before and after they join the cohort. On the other hand, workers are generally healthier when they start work than unemployed people. The confounder in this case—“health status at hire”—would tend to produce negative bias if acting alone. The overall degree of confounding bias will reflect the net effect of all these factors, with positive and negative biases cancelling each other out to some extent.

The observation of reduced mortality rates in worker cohorts compared to the general population has been called the healthy worker effect but, confusingly, authors also use this term solely to describe the effect of health related selection. In fact the phenomenon of reduced rates, such as a standardised mortality ratio (SMR) less than 100, reflects the sum of the effects of: (1) potential confounders, (2) other study biases—for example, under-ascertainment of deaths—and (3) exposure. If there is no exposure effect and no bias apart from confounding, the reduced SMR still reflects the net effect of all the potential confounders—lifestyle risk factors, concomitant exposures, and health status at hire. Therefore the independent effect of health related selection into work, or equivalently health status at hire, could be greater than previously acknowledged in some cases. In what follows the ambiguous term “healthy worker effect” will be avoided; the more precise terms “healthy worker hire effect” and “healthy worker survivor effect”, which describe the problems of health related selection into and out of work, will be used instead.

Internal comparisons

Internal comparisons between exposure subgroups of a cohort may be less confounded than comparisons with the general population since lifestyle risk factors and health status at hire may be more similar within the cohort than across the general population. Nevertheless confounding by initial health status is still possible—for example, in a study comparing shift

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Incidence density rates and ratios for headaches according to exposure (E): adjusted and unadjusted for genotype (S)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P years to first headache</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events</td>
<td>982</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate per person</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposure rate ratio</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from a table in Greenland.9
workers with day workers in the same company, workers going into shift work might be healthier initially. If relevant measures of health at hire, or at entry into shiftwork in this example, could be made, these would provide a route for at least partial adjustment for confounding by health related selection into work. Alternatively, or in addition, “time since hire analyses” provide a route for investigation and control of this confounding; this is because the effects of differential health status at hire on future mortality rates “wears off” as time since hire increases.

There may also be confounding due to lifestyle differences after hire: again, where possible, adjustments for these differences should be made. However, one should not automatically adjust for such variables if they are potentially affected by exposure (see C3a and earlier examples).

**Internal comparisons between cumulative exposure groups**

Internal comparisons between groups defined by cumulative exposure may have additional confounding problems because cumulative exposure can be associated with other time related factors. Two of these problems are easily solved. Firstly, in studies covering long time periods there may be confounding due to “birth cohort” effects—for example, low and high cumulative exposure groups may come from different generations which would have had different risks anyway. This problem is solved by treating birth cohort, or alternatively calendar period, as a confounder and adjusting for it. Secondly, “dose”–response relationships based on cumulative exposure can be exaggerated due to differential health status at entry to the cohort; this problem is apparently solved by time since hire analyses.17

The third problem is more challenging. Even if there was no confounding at entry into the work force, groups defined by cumulative exposure may become non-comparable, so that comparisons between them are confounded. Consider a study of cumulative exposure and overall mortality rates. There are three necessary conditions for this type of confounding, which might also be called the health worker survivor effect, to occur:

1. “ill” workers must be more likely to leave work than other workers
2. “illness” must be predictive of future mortality rates, and
3. cumulative exposure and duration of employment must be positively correlated.

The impact of these three conditions is to reduce (attenuate) the true “dose–response” relationship between cumulative exposure and mortality. This will occur whether or not there is any true effect of exposure on risk; if there was no exposure effect, it would produce an apparently negative relationship between cumulative exposure and mortality. Given the importance of dose–response relationships as persuasive evidence of causation of this problem, this type of confounding should be a concern. Among studies which have corrected for this type of bias are those which found associations between arsenic and lung cancer and circulatory disease, whereas these relationships were not apparent in the uncorrected data.

Figure 2 illustrates the relationships (1–3) for a hypothetical study of mortality rates (M). Exposure has been divided into three five year periods denoted by E1, E2, and E3; cumulative exposure (not shown) is defined simply as the number of years in employment. As before, an arrow from any variable to another implies that the former is a cause of the latter. U1, U2, and U3 denote occurrences of serious morbidity while employed in the three periods. As specified by (1), occurrence of morbidity during work is assumed to influence the decision to leave work—for example, U1→L1. For simplicity, it is assumed that leaving takes place at fixed time points only—5 years and 10 years after the start of exposure. As specified by (3), leaving work influences future exposure and hence cumulative exposure—for example, L1→E2. Finally, morbidity influences future mortality—for example, U2→M. In addition, this diagram assumes exposure effects: exposure is a cause of morbidity while employed—for example, E1→U1. A causal path linking exposure and mortality directly (for example, E1→M without passing through U1) might also have been added for realism but would not change the main message.

One method proposed to overcome the attenuation problem is that employment status—for example, L1—be treated as a confounder.18 Morbidity—for example, U1—might seem a more obvious candidate but this is typically unobserved in historical cohort studies and employment status might be viewed as a very crude proxy measure of it. This solution will work only when there is no effect of exposure on morbidity. If there is an exposure effect—as postulated by fig 2—it will not. This can be deduced directly from the diagram: the existence of paths such as E1→U1→L1 violates condition C3a and thus standard adjustment for employment status is not warranted.

In fact this confounding problem does not appear to be solvable using standard statistical adjustment methods. Radically different methods, the so-called G methods, appear to succeed but, unfortunately, these are not currently available in standard statistical software. One exception is a G method recently implemented in the STATA statistical package. For the present, use of causal diagrams is recommended to explore the implications of various assumptions about the effects of health related selection out of the workforce.

**Confounders and confounders in case–control studies**

The definitions in boxes 1 and 2 apply as much to case–control studies as to cohort studies. Despite their design, the underlying causal question in the former concerns differences between exposure groups and therefore the question of confounding concerns the comparability of exposure groups, not the comparability of cases and controls. Consider a case–control study of lung cancer which is nested within an occupational cohort. The cohort (n = 2000) consists of both exposed and unexposed subjects, but it is too expensive to estimate
exposure for all of them; instead all cases of lung cancer in the cohort (n = 50) and a random sample of non-cases (n = 200) are chosen for investigation of past exposure. The choice of case–control design here is a matter of practicality; it does not change the fact that confounding is a question of the comparability of exposed and unexposed members of the cohort.

In community based case–control studies also, confounding is a question of the comparability of exposed and unexposed members of the underlying study population (the study base). Modern teaching on case–control studies stresses the importance of defining this study population; it consists of all those people who would have been included in the case group if they had developed the disease. For example, in a case–control study based on lung cancer cases identified from a cancer registry, the study population might be roughly equal to the whole population of the region covered by the cancer registry. Confounding would refer to the comparability of the exposed and unexposed members in the whole of this region.

In searching for confounders among measured factors in a case–control study, a specific problem is that all of the study population has not been measured: only the cases and a sample of non-cases (controls). This is merely a problem of precision, in that a sample gives less precise information than a whole population. More importantly, to assess the comparability of exposed and unexposed in the study population, exposed and unexposed subjects in the control group only should be compared. This is because, roughly speaking, the controls in a case–control study represent the study population.

Much of the present understanding of the confounding/seLECTION problems associated with the healthy worker hire effect and healthy worker survivor effect has come from cohort studies. These problems are rarely mentioned in case–control studies but they are no less relevant. To see this, consider again the example of a case–control study nested within a cohort. In the cohort as a whole, healthier workers may have been selected into exposed jobs and ill workers may have been more likely to leave employment; these processes do not disappear simply because the researcher has chosen a case–control design. In theory the strategies adopted to deal with these problems in cohort studies could also be applied in nested case–control studies. For example, in one nested case–control study of shift work and cardiovascular disease, the authors adjusted for an apparent “healthy shiftworker hire effect”.

In community based case–control studies, the task of accounting for selection effects is far more complex given that subjects may have moved into and out of several different workplaces. As a simple attempt, it has been proposed that cases and controls should be classified into at least three categories—exposed workers, unexposed workers, and unemployed—with only exposed and non-exposed workers contributing to the analysis.

Confounding and selection bias in environmental epidemiology

Understanding of health related selection, and how it contributes to confounding, is well developed in occupational epidemiology. In environmental studies, analogies with occupational selection effects may be informative. Exposed groups are sometimes defined by geographical residence—for example, proximity to a suspected environmental pollutant; confounding due to selection bias, over and above general socioeconomic confounding, is also possible here. An effect analogous to the healthy worker hire effect could occur if a cohort of residents were compared with the general population, as from the time they moved into the area. If moving to a new house (mobility) is associated with better health status then there might be a “healthy mover effect” with morbidity or mortality rates lower initially than in the general population. For the same reason, a long duration of residence at the same address might be associated with reduced mobility as a consequence of poor health. In theory this confounding, which one might also call an “unhealthy stayer effect”, could create a false dose response relationship.

**REFERENCES**

10. Checkoway H. The notion of confounding as non-comparability is unambiguous, but there is no simple, completely foolproof definition of a confounder.
11. There have been recent changes in the necessary conditions for a confounder: factors affected by exposure are not confounders.
12. There can be a conflict in the notions of confounding as non-comparability (box 1) and as non-collapsibility. The non-comparability definition is preferable.
13. For identification of confounders:
   - data is generally an imperfect guide
   - causal diagrams can help clarify thinking
   - external evidence may be relevant
   - degree of confounding is more important than statistical significance
14. In occupational health:
   - the healthy worker hire effect (HWHE) and survivor effect (HWSE) can be construed as confounding
   - both HWHE and HWSE can affect within-cohort comparisons
   - the HWSE leads to attenuation of exposure–response relationships based on cumulative exposure
   - health related selection into and out of work is also relevant in case–control studies
QUESTIONS (SEE ANSWERS ON P 164)
For each question please indicate which answers are true or false.

1. Confounding:
   (a) arises from lack of comparability of exposed and unexposed groups
   (b) arises from lack of comparability of cases and controls in case–control studies
   (c) is not a concern when comparing groups with different degrees of exposure
   (d) is not a concern in descriptive (non-causal) studies

2. Confounders:
   (a) are risk factors for disease
   (b) will always show a relationship with disease risk in data
   (c) must be significantly different (p < 0.05) between exposed and unexposed groups
   (d) must not be caused by exposure

3. A change in estimate definition of a confounder:
   (a) is based on a comparison of adjusted and unadjusted measures of exposure effect
   (b) may sometimes conflict with the criteria C1–C3a
   (c) is defined solely in terms of statistical criteria

4. Causal diagrams:
   (a) distinguish between association and causation
   (b) have different forms depending on whether odds ratios or incidence rate ratios are used
   (c) can help to decide whether a suspect factor is a confounder

5. The healthy worker hire effect and healthy worker survivor effect:
   (a) are examples of selection bias
   (b) are not examples of confounding
   (c) can affect dose–response relationships
   (d) do not affect data from case–control studies

6. In comparisons of worker groups defined by cumulative exposure:
   (a) duration of employment and cumulative exposure may be correlated
   (b) duration of employment and health will be associated if there is a healthy worker survivor effect (HWSE)
   (c) the “dose–response” relationship may be exaggerated because of the healthy worker survivor effect (HWSE)
Confounding and confounders

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