

## Introduction to diagnostic test accuracy studies

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## Introduction to diagnostic test accuracy studies

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2 **Introduction to diagnostic test accuracy studies**

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15

16

17 **Abstract**

18 Diagnostic accuracy studies are fundamental for the assessment of diagnostic tests. Researchers  
19 need to understand the implications of their chosen design, opting for comparative designs where  
20 possible. Researchers should analyse test accuracy studies using the appropriate methods,  
21 acknowledging the uncertainty of results and avoiding overstating conclusions and ignoring the  
22 clinical situation which should inform the trade-off between sensitivity and specificity. Test accuracy  
23 studies should be reported with transparency using the STARD checklist (1).

24

25

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## 26 **Introduction**

27 Diagnosing diseases is crucial in medicine, and for this purpose many diagnostic tests and  
28 procedures are applied. For the diagnosis of a suspected adrenal carcinoma a CT scan is performed,  
29 and an insulin tolerance test (ITT) for adrenal insufficiency. The performance of these tests can be  
30 investigated in diagnostic accuracy studies.

31 Medical diagnostic tests are evaluated in different ways, depending on the stage of evaluation and  
32 the purpose of the test. A fundamental aspect of the evaluation of diagnostic tests is *test accuracy*,  
33 that is, the ability of a test to differentiate between those who have and those who do not have the  
34 condition or disease of interest. In this article we define key terminology (see box 1) used in the  
35 context of test accuracy, and describe basic aspects of study design and analysis.

36 Guidelines for reporting of test accuracy studies, The STAndards for the Reporting of Diagnostic  
37 accuracy studies (STARD) checklist (1), have been published and we recommend their use to  
38 increase quality and transparency of reporting.

39

## 40 **Measures of test accuracy**

41 Test accuracy is determined by cross classifying the results (positive and negative) of an index test  
42 against those of the reference standard. This produces a two-by-two table giving the number of true  
43 positives, false positives, false negatives and true negatives, see box 2. Standard methods for  
44 estimating test accuracy require binary classification of the results of the index test and the  
45 reference standard. As such when test results are non-binary, criteria (referred to as thresholds, cut-  
46 offs or cut-points) are needed to define test negatives and test positives. For example, when  
47 assessing the test accuracy for the CRH-test for adrenal insufficiency, a cut-off needs to be defined.

48 Measures of test accuracy should always be accompanied by a 95% confidence interval (CI), which is  
49 a measure of uncertainty for the point estimate. In example given in box 2, the 95% CI for the  
50 sensitivity ranges from 0.96 to 0.99; the 95% CI for specificity is wider, ranging from 0.67 to 0.78.

51

## 52 **Study population and design**

53 There are different phases in the evaluation of a diagnostic test. Firstly, test performance is  
54 determined in a population of clearly established cases and non-cases (2, 3), this referred to as  
55 proof-of-concept or exploratory study. Secondly, assessment in a representative population in an  
56 appropriate clinical setting (prospective consecutive recruitment of suspected cases) can be  
57 performed (4). The spectrum of disease will vary between these designs; researchers should be  
58 aware of this difference when planning studies and generalising results of studies to clinical settings  
59 (5, 6). When researchers perform an exploratory study involving known cases and non-cases  
60 (referred to as a diagnostic case-control or two-gate design (2)), (positive and negative) predictive  
61 values should not be directly calculated using two-by-two data from such studies. This is because  
62 predictive values are directly related to prevalence and the proportion of participants with the target  
63 condition in case-control studies is artificial, i.e. determined by the study investigators. For example,  
64 doubling the number cases would directly affect the calculated NPV and PPV. This is not the case  
65 when a representative population is sampled, for example all pituitary adenoma patients with  
66 suspected ACTH deficiency.

67 Test accuracy studies often evaluate a single index test but where alternative tests exist that can be  
68 used at the same point in the diagnostic pathway (providing the tests do not interfere with each  
69 other and the patient burden is not too great), these test can be evaluated in one study population  
70 (7). The ideal comparative study design is to perform all tests and the reference standard on all  
71 participants (paired or within-subject design) or to randomise participants to receive one of the  
72 index tests (8). The randomised design is preferred when it is not possible to perform multiple index

73 tests on each individual for ethical or logistical reasons. Additionally, the role of the test in the  
74 diagnostic pathway—replacement, triage or add-on—should be considered when designing a study  
75 (8).

76

### 77 **Sample size**

78 Sample size calculations for test accuracy studies should be determined prior to recruitment; see (9,  
79 10) for details. When evaluating a single test, a common approach is based on the precision around  
80 an estimate of sensitivity and/or specificity (i.e. width of the confidence intervals). The precision of  
81 the sensitivity estimate will increase with the number of participants with the target condition  
82 (reference standard positive) and the precision of the specificity estimate will increase with the  
83 number of participants without the target condition (reference standard negative). Hence, it is vital  
84 to have an estimate of the prevalence of the target condition to plan the sample size.

85

### 86 **Statistical analysis of accuracy studies**

87 Measures of test accuracy (see box 1) can be calculated along with 95% confidence intervals (11, 12).  
88 For test accuracy studies comparing two tests, additionally the difference in sensitivity and  
89 specificity between the index tests can be computed. With the paired comparative design,  
90 McNemar's test can be used to test differences in sensitivity and specificity. Alternatively, regression  
91 modelling taking into account the paired nature of the data can be performed. The effect of  
92 important clinical characteristics on test accuracy can also be explored using such models; for  
93 example it can be assessed whether age determines differences of two index tests. For the  
94 randomised comparative design, a test of independent proportions can be used to compare  
95 sensitivity and specificity between groups.

96 For tests with non-binary results, receiver operating characteristic (ROC) curve analysis is typically  
97 performed. There is a negative relationship between sensitivity and specificity as the cut-point  
98 changes (threshold effect); if we for example lower the cortisol threshold for the diagnosis of  
99 adrenal insufficiency, this will increase sensitivity (less false negatives), as a consequence however,  
100 the specificity will be lower (more false positives) A ROC curve displays this trade-off between  
101 sensitivity and specificity at different cut-points for a test (see figure 2), and curves for different tests  
102 in a comparative study can be compared on a single ROC plot. A simplistic cut-point would maximise  
103 sensitivity and specificity. However, an appropriate cut-point for use in clinical practice should be  
104 driven by the consequences for false positive and false negative results. If a study is used to derive a  
105 cutpoint for a test the performance, external validation is required, as a single study will likely  
106 overestimate the test's performance. This is especially the case for small studies.

107

#### 108 **Concluding remarks**

109 Diagnostic test accuracy studies are required to understand the potential for new diagnostic  
110 technologies. It is vital that researchers understand the implications of the design of their studies  
111 and the impact on the study conclusions. Researchers need to understand the clinical situation and  
112 weigh the consequences of misidentifying positive and negative participants. There is a need for  
113 clear and transparent reporting allowing the limitations of studies to be identified. We encourage  
114 researchers to seek specialist support when embarking on these studies.

115

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<p><b>Target condition</b></p> <p>The target condition is the disease or condition the test(s) are aiming to diagnose e.g. adrenocortical carcinoma (ACC) or adrenal insufficiency.</p>
<p><b>Target population</b></p> <p>The target population is the population of interest e.g. patients with an incidentally discovered adrenal mass, or patients with an adrenal mass found on imaging for staging purposes of extra-adrenal malignancy; patients with a pituitary adenoma in whom ACTH deficiency is assessed.</p>
<p><b>Index test(s)</b></p> <p>An index test is a test the researchers aim to evaluate. A study may evaluate more than one index test, e.g. non-contrast computerised tomography (CT) and MRI for an adrenal mass.</p>
<p><b>Reference standard</b></p> <p>The reference standard, sometimes referred to as the “gold” standard, is the best way of verifying the presence or absence of the target condition. This may be a test that is not normally used or available in practice, such as a period of follow up to confirm or exclude the presence of the target condition (for example ACC) at the time the index test was done, or a combination of several pieces of information (known as a composite reference standard) e.g. histologically proven diagnosis (obtained through adrenalectomy or adrenal biopsy) or imaging-based follow-up (for example, twice yearly CT). Be aware that the even the reference standard is not always perfect (ITT for adrenal insufficiency).</p>
<p><b>Sensitivity and specificity</b></p> <p>The <i>sensitivity</i> of a test is the proportion of participants with the target condition (positive reference standard) that have a positive index test result, <i>specificity</i> is the proportion of participants without the target condition (negative reference standard) that have a negative index test result.</p>
<p><b>Positive and negative predictive values</b></p> <p>The <i>positive predictive value</i> (PPV) is the proportion of participants with a positive index test result who truly have the target condition. The <i>negative predictive value</i> (NPV) is the proportion of participants with a negative index test result who truly do not have the target condition.</p>

Box 1: Key terminology for test accuracy studies

146x157mm (120 x 120 DPI)

2x2 table			Calculations	
Index test	Reference test			
	+	-		
+	279	61	• Sensitivity=TP/(TP+FN)=279/(279+5)	
-	5	163	• Specificity=TN/(TN+FP)=163/(163+61)	
Results			Interpretation	
	Estimate	95% CI		
Sensitivity	0.98	0.96, 0.99	• Sensitivity: 98% of the participants with disease have a positive index test.	
Specificity	0.73	0.67, 0.78	• Specificity: 73% of the participants without disease have a negative index test.	
PPV	0.82	0.78, 0.86	• PPV: 82% of the participants with a positive index test have the disease.	
NPV	0.97	0.93, 0.99	• NPV: 97% of the participants with a negative index test do not have the disease.	

Box 2: Example calculations, results and interpretation. TP is the number of true positive results; TN is the number of true positive results; FP is the number of false positive results; FN is the number of false negative results; PPV is the positive predictive value; NPV is the negative predictive value.

149x97mm (120 x 120 DPI)

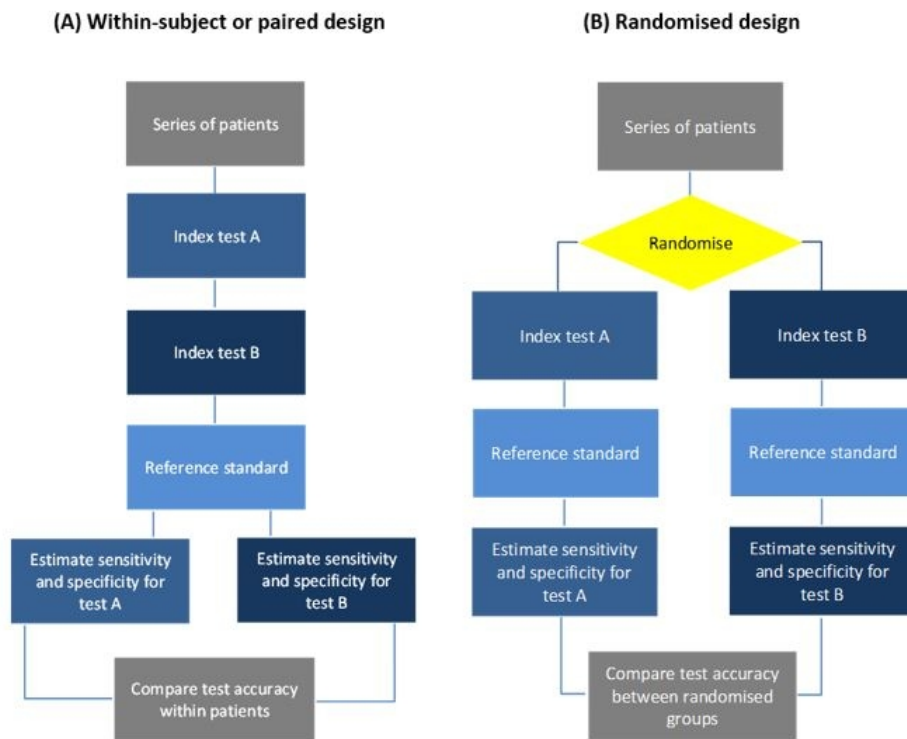


Figure 1: Robust study designs for comparing test accuracy by Y. Takwoingi (9). In (A) all patients undergo all index tests while in (B) patients are randomly assigned to only one of the index tests. In both (A) and (B), all patients receive the reference standard. Both designs are valid, although the paired design requires a smaller study sample.

150x117mm (120 x 120 DPI)

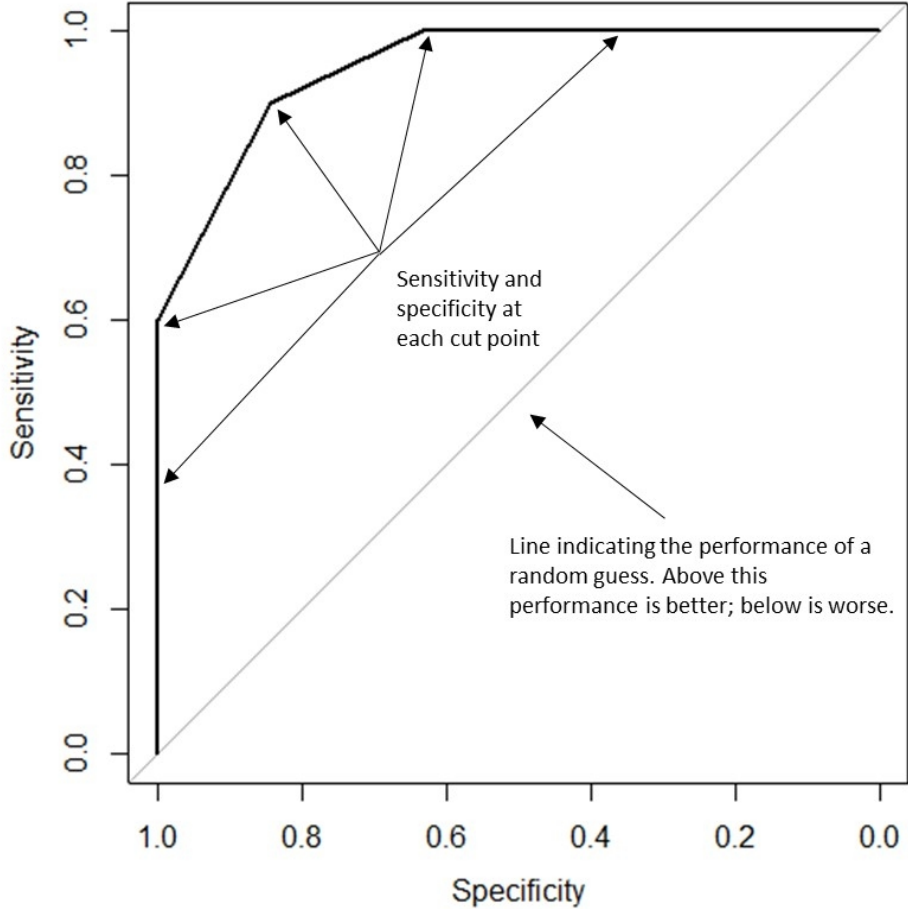


Figure 2: ROC curve example

142x142mm (150 x 150 DPI)