



Applying the GRADE methodology to SIGN guidelines: core principles

In 2009, SIGN took the decision to implement the GRADE approach within its guideline development methodology. This work is currently in process. There is, however, scope for variation in what people mean when they say they are “applying the GRADE system”. For clarity, this statement sets out the principles that SIGN will be applying when implementing GRADE.

We believe these principles are in line with the criteria set out by the GRADE Working Group, as they stood in June 2010.

1. All guideline recommendations will be based on a systematic review of the available evidence, and an assessment of the quality of that evidence. **Quality of evidence** is defined as the extent to which confidence in an estimate of the effect is adequate to support recommendations.
2. Assessment of quality of evidence will be carried out in the context of its relevance to the NHS in Scotland. Criteria for establishing the overall quality of evidence will include all factors for increasing or decreasing the quality of evidence identified by the GRADE Working Group.
3. Evidence identified in a systematic review will be summarised in an evidence table listing key characteristics of individual studies. Each table will in turn be summarised in relation to the overall quality of evidence for each critical or important outcome identified by the guideline development group (GDG). These summaries will form the basis for all decisions regarding the **quality of evidence** or **strength of recommendations**. Summaries will be produced either using Gradepro software or by recording decisions made by the GDG relating to each quality factor in a considered judgement form specific to this stage of the process.
4. Quality of evidence will be rated in one of four categories (ranging from low to high) as defined by the GRADE working group.
5. **Strength of recommendation** will be established on the basis of explicit consideration of each of the criteria established by the GRADE Working Group, and recorded in a considered judgement form specific to this stage of the process.
6. **Recommendations** will either be **unconditional** (strong evidence, no important drawbacks) or **conditional** (weaker evidence, serious potential drawbacks).