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Measuring disease occurrence

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Different measures may be used to describe how often disease (or another health event) occurs in a population. Incidence expresses the development of new cases and is mostly used against the background of prevention, to assess disease etiology or to determine the risk factors of disease. Depending on the specific study question, incidence may be reported as risk or as incidence rate. This paper discusses that it is preferable to use incidence rate in case of a dynamic population or in cases where the observation period is sufficiently long for competing risks or loss to follow-up to play a significant role. Prevalence is the number of existing cases, which is affected by both the number of incident cases and the length of disease time. It reflects the burden of disease on a population that may, among others, be measured in terms of costs or morbidity. Knowledge about this burden can be used for the planning of health-care facilities. This paper discusses the different measures of disease occurrence using a number of examples taken from the nephrology literature.

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Epidemiology is the study of the occurrence of disease. In this case 'disease' should be interpreted quite broadly, as epidemiology studies many types of health outcomes or events. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention therefore use a wider definition like 'the study of the distribution and determinants of health-related states or events in specified populations, and the application of this study to the control of health problems'.[1] The type of measure of disease occurrence to be used for analysis depends on the purpose of a study.

If we are performing a study against the background of prevention and we aim to assess the etiology of a disease or event and determine its risk factors, we are interested in the development of *new cases* of that disease over a period of follow-up, the so-called *incidence*. Should we, on the other hand, wish to know the burden of disease on a population because we need this for the planning of health-care facilities it is much more useful to know the number of *existing cases* that is expressed by the *prevalence* of disease.

INCIDENCE

Two measures of disease occurrence deal with new cases: risk and incidence rate (for a definition of terms see Table 1). Risk is a proportion; it is the ratio of the number of subjects developing disease (or other health outcome) over a specific period to the number of subjects followed:

$$\text{Risk} = \frac{\text{Number of subjects developing disease during a time period}}{\text{Number of subjects followed for the time period}}$$

To quantify *risk* (synonyms: cumulative incidence, incidence proportion), it is always necessary to define a time period to which the risk applies. This can simply be illustrated with the concept of risk of death. We as humans can be fairly certain that the risk of death within 150 years is 100%, whereas the risk of death within 1 day will usually be quite small. Secondly, the concept of risk assumes that subjects are followed for the entire time period. That such may not always be the case is illustrated by example 1 that was taken from the paper of Puliyanda *et al.*[2]

Example 1 – Risk

The paper of Puliyanda et al.[2] *describes a cohort of 3106 children during the first 2 years post-renal transplantation. One*

of the purposes of the study was to determine the risk of hospitalization for bacterial infection in the first 2 years after renal transplantation. One hundred and sixty-four children lost their grafts in the first 6 months after transplantation. Six hundred and eighty-seven patients were hospitalized for bacterial infection.

In this example, what would be the risk of hospitalization for bacterial infection in the first 2 years post-renal transplantation? There were 3106 children 'at risk' at the moment of transplantation. As 687 children developed bacterial infection for which they needed to be admitted to hospital the risk should, according to its definition, be calculated as $687/3106 = 22.1\%$. The problem was, however, that 164 children lost their graft for another reason than bacterial infection and were therefore not able anymore to develop the event of interest. This example shows that there are problems with the concept of risk as a measure of disease occurrence. In general, such problems will occur if the observation period is relatively long and study participants may cease to be at risk for the event of interest, for example, because they die from other causes or get lost to follow-up.[3] One could consider the risk of death from other causes as 'competing' with the risk of the event of interest. Although, intuitively, risk is relatively easy to interpret, in cases where the observation period is sufficiently long for competing risks or loss to follow-up to play a significant role, risk may be less suitable as a measure of incidence.[4] As explained in the next paragraph, other circumstances where risk may not be the preferred measure of disease occurrence include the use of dynamic populations as populations at risk and in studies where events can happen more than once in one individual. Therefore, in many cases it is better to use incidence rate.

Incidence rate is the ratio of the number of subjects developing disease (or other health outcome) to the time at risk for disease:

$$\text{Incidence rate} = \frac{\text{Number of subjects developing disease}}{\text{Total time at risk for the subjects followed}}$$

This formula shows that incidence rate differs from risk in that the denominator includes a measure of time instead of a number of subjects. In this perspective, incidence rate is an instantaneous concept, like speed. A major advantage of using incidence rate (synonyms: incidence density, hazard, force of morbidity/mortality) compared to using risk is that it is not required for every study subject to complete the entire risk period, as only 'time at risk' is taken into account. This property makes the incidence rate very useful in dynamic populations, in cases where subjects may or may not be at risk for the event of interest for particular periods of time. Suppose we would be interested in the incidence rate of peritonitis requiring hospitalization in continuous ambulatory peritoneal dialysis (CAPD) patients in 2004 and we would have diagnosed a number of such peritonitis episodes in 17 CAPD patients. We would then need to calculate the total time at risk, that is, the total time on CAPD. Figure 1 shows that together these 17 patients were 144 patient-months at risk. In this period, there were four of such episodes. The incidence rate of peritonitis episodes requiring hospitalization would therefore be $4/144 = 0.028$ per patient-month or $4/12 = 0.33$ per patient-year.

Example 2 – Incidence rate

For the year 2005, Kramar and Oberbauer[5] reported a number of 374 renal transplants in an Austrian population of 8.1 million inhabitants. The incidence rate of renal transplantation in Austria in that year was therefore 46 transplants per million person-years or, as it is usually stated, per million population.

Another practical application of incidence rate is renal transplant rate as shown in example 2. In order to be able to compare transplant activity between countries, registries divide annual transplant numbers by the number of country inhabitants. For a dynamic population as the general population, it is unfeasible to calculate the different times at risk for different persons and then add them up. However, under steady-state conditions persons dying in this general population are being replaced by newborns and, therefore,

Table 1 | Definitons of terms

Concept		Definition	Formula
Incidence	Risk	Probability of developing disease	No. of subjects developing disease during a time period / No. of subjects followed for the time period
	Incidence rate	Ratio of the number of cases to the time at risk for disease	No. of subjects developing disease / Total time at risk for the subjects followed
Prevalence	Point prevalence	Proportion of people in a population having disease at a particular point in time	No. of subjects having disease at a particular point in time / Total no. of subjects in the population
	Period prevalence	Proportion of people in a population having disease over a period of time	No. of subjects with disease at the start of the period + no. of subjects developing disease over the time period / Total no. of subjects in the population