

What factors affect women's decisions to take part in clinical trials? A qualitative evidence synthesis

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1. Why was this review needed?

Despite efforts to improve the representation of women in clinical trials, they continue to be **underserved** across a range of clinical areas, limiting generalisability and appropriateness of health treatments.

The subsequent impact on women's health outcomes means there is a pressing need to gather their views and experiences to improve representation in clinical trials.

AIM: In this review, we aimed to synthesise the evidence regarding factors affecting women's decisions to participate in clinical trials.

How public partners are supporting the review

Public partners felt the review addressed a relevant gap in knowledge.

Final descriptive themes will be sense-checked with public partners.

2. Methods



Eligibility criteria

Included studies were qualitative research exploring women's experiences or perspectives relating to recruitment to clinical trials.

Exclusion:

- Primary studies relating to trials that were:
- conducted in non-OECD countries or the USA
- focussed on reproductive/perinatal populations.

Scan me for protocol



Searches

Rapid methods: Medline (from Aug 2019) and ORRCA (From May 2017) searched December 2025.
Included studies list from a seed paper (Cochrane QES).
Forward and backwards citation searching.



Analysis

- Descriptive thematic analysis
- Reflexivity discussions regarding researcher positionality.

Title/abstracts screened: 6335

Full texts assessed for eligibility: 567

Included records: 21 (20 studies)

3. Findings

19/20 studies conducted in European countries (UK n=11).



Samples consisted of both those who consented and those who declined to participate in a clinical trial.



Most primary qualitative studies investigated trials evaluating pharmaceutical interventions.



No studies reported on the socio-economic circumstances of participants.



Participant ages ranged from 16 – 80+ years.



Most studies were linked to trials with a female-only sample in the area of oncology.

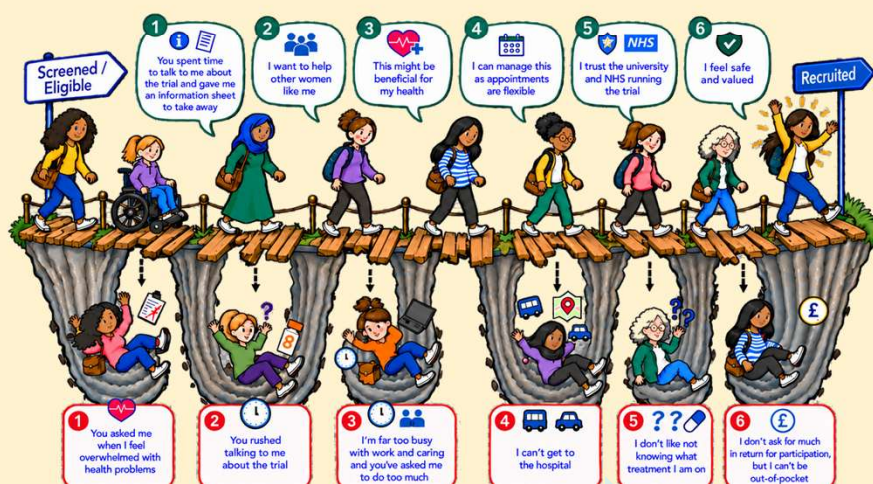


Figure 1. A visual representation of descriptive themes generated by researcher analysis and interpretation. Image generated using Microsoft CoPilot.

4. Discussion: what this means for trialists

Finding suggest women's participation is shaped by interwoven factors relating to **trial design, communication, altruism and trust**. Trialists should consider findings when designing trials to ensure women are recruited proportionally to their representation in the treated population.

5. Next steps

Collaborative verification of themes with both experienced and community public involvement groups.

Grade CERQual analysis to assess confidence in the review findings.

Integration of results with a Cochrane review of trial recruitment strategies.

Results to inform inclusive trial design

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