Update on the Methods of the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force: Methods for Understanding Certainty and Net Benefit When Making Recommendations

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Since the 1980s, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) has developed and used rigorous methods to make evidence-based recommendations about preventive services to promote health and well-being for all Americans. Recommendations are based on the evidence of magnitude of net benefit (benefits minus harms). Expert opinion is not substituted when evidence is lacking. Evidence gaps are common. Few preventive services are supported by high-quality studies that directly and comprehensively determine the overall magnitude of benefits and harms in the same study. When assessing the body of evidence, studies may not have been conducted in primary care settings, studies may not have sufficiently included populations of interest, and long-term outcomes may not have been directly assessed. When direct evidence is not available, the USPSTF uses the methodologies of applicability to determine whether evidence can be generalized to an asymptomatic primary care population; coherence to link bodies of evidence and create an indirect evidence pathway; extrapolation to make inferences across the indirect evidence pathway, extend evidence to populations not specifically studied, consider service delivery intervals, and infer long-term outcomes; and conceptual bounding to set theoretical lower or upper limits for plausible benefits or harms. The USPSTF extends the evidence only so far as to maintain at least moderate certainty that its findings are preserved. This manuscript details with examples of how the USPSTF uses these methods to make recommendations that truly reflect the evidence.

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INTRODUCTION

The mission of the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) is to provide evidence-based recommendations on preventive services.

Recommendations are based on a systematic review of the evidence concerning both the benefits and harms, assessment of the certainty and magnitude of net benefit, and assignment of a letter grade. This process is based on...
For many preventive services, the USPSTF looks for additional evidence because direct evidence may be absent or the direct evidence pathway may be incomplete (e.g., rare or long-term harms are less often observed in RCTs of screening but may be reported in cohort studies). Accordingly, the USPSTF also considers the indirect evidence pathway for many preventive services. This is defined as the indirect chain of evidence that connects the target population (far left side of the analytic framework) to the ultimate health outcome (far right side of the analytic framework) through a series of linked key questions (Figure 1). In addition to the evidence for benefits, evidence for harms is necessary to determine the magnitude of net benefit. Recommendations are based not only on the adequacy of the evidence for each key question, but also the overall certainty of linking the key questions to create an unbroken chain of evidence.

Frequently, there are evidence gaps in the indirect pathway that must be considered. Studies may not follow participants long enough to fully assess long-term health outcomes, which can sometimes take decades to occur. Studies may not have adequate power to identify important beneficial outcomes or identify rare harms. Studies may not be done in primary care settings or on asymptomatic average risk populations. Specific populations of interest may not have been adequately included in studies and many elements needed to make a recommendation useful to clinicians may not have been studied (e.g., age to start, age to stop, and service delivery interval).

For each USPSTF recommendation, there is first an assessment of the certainty of the evidence, followed by an estimate of the magnitude of net benefit (defined as all the benefits minus all the harms). The combination of certainty and magnitude of net benefit determines the letter recommendation (A recommendation if there is high certainty and substantial benefit, B recommendation if there is at least moderate certainty of moderate benefit, C recommendation if there is at least moderate certainty of small benefit, and D recommendation if there is at least moderate certainty of zero or negative benefit). The USPSTF uses the concepts of applicability and coherence as part of the judgment regarding the certainty of net benefit. Similarly, it uses the concepts of extrapolation and conceptual bounding to aid in judging the magnitude of benefit. This manuscript details the USPSTF’s use of these methods using examples to highlight concepts.

**APPLYING SIX CRITICAL APPRAISAL QUESTIONS TO EACH KEY QUESTION**

The USPSTF’s first step in assessing the overall certainty of the evidence is to answer six critical appraisal questions for
each key question in the analytic framework. The critical appraisal questions consider whether studies have the appropriate research design; risk of bias (internal validity); applicability; precision; consistency; and plausibility

(Table 1). This approach builds on the work of others and is a commonly used framework for evaluating evidence.

Given its mission of making clinical preventive service recommendations for primary care, the USPSTF

Table 1. Critical Appraisal Questions: Factors Considered for Evaluating Adequacy of Evidence for Each Key Question and Across Key Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Critical Appraisal Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Do the studies have the appropriate research design to answer the key question(s)?</td>
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<td>2. To what extent are the existing studies of sufficient quality? (i.e., what is the internal validity?)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. To what extent are the results of the studies generalizable to the general U.S. primary care population of interest to the intervention and situation? (i.e., what is the applicability?)</td>
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<td>4. How many and how large are the studies that address the key question(s)? Are the results precise?</td>
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<td>5. How consistent are the results of the studies?</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Are there additional factors that assist us in drawing conclusions (e.g., fit within a biologic model)?</td>
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Table 2. Key USPSTF Considerations about Applicability, Coherence, Extrapolation, and Conceptual Bounding as They Relate to Certainty and Magnitude of Net Benefit

<table>
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<th>Applicability</th>
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<tr>
<td>Certainty</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Is the evidence applicable to an asymptomatic general population?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Is the evidence applicable to U.S. primary care clinicians?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Is the intervention acceptable, feasible, and available to the U.S. primary care setting?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magnitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is there a gap in the evidence chain that can be overcome with the use of extrapolation to make an assessment on magnitude of net benefit?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Is it valid and clinically relevant to use extrapolation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is there a gap in the evidence about benefits or harms that could be estimated at a minimum or maximum bound to allow an assessment on magnitude of net benefit?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is it valid and clinically relevant to use conceptual bounding?</td>
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N/A, not applicable; USPSTF, U.S. Preventive Services Task Force.
faces a unique set of issues when considering the impact of applicability on certainty (Table 2). Applicability is like generalizability or external validity, but for the USPSTF, it has a very specific meaning. The USPSTF defines applicability as the extent to which results of studies are generalizable to the general asymptomatic U.S. primary care population or specific primary care populations of interest. Frequently, studies evaluate different populations, providers, or settings than the asymptomatic primary care population. For example, the evidence about screening high-risk individuals for syphilis mainly included studies in sexually transmitted infection clinics. The USPSTF judged this evidence as applicable to a similarly high-risk patient seen in a primary care setting as the performance of the test, treatment, and follow-up would be similar in both settings. However, the USPSTF did not think the evidence for the benefit of treating autism, which was primarily from trials of children referred to highly specialized treatment centers, was applicable to a screen-detected population. The concern was that the screen-detected group would likely be much younger and less severely affected than the group seen in the treatment studies and therefore may not derive the same benefit. Similarly, the USPSTF did not think that the evidence about reduced daytime sleepiness resulting from treating sleep apnea in patients referred to sleep centers for symptoms would be applicable to a screen-detected population with less severe symptoms.

A common consideration about applicability is whether studies conducted outside the U.S. are applicable to the U.S. When developing the analytic framework, the USPSTF explicitly defines whether evidence from other countries will be included. Once studies are identified, the Evidence-based Practice Centers and USPSTF again consider the applicability of each study. For many preventive services, the USPSTF considers evidence from countries categorized as “very high” on the Human Development Index to be applicable to the U.S. For example, the USPSTF decided that the evidence about folic acid supplementation from developed, but not underdeveloped, countries applied to the U.S., as the underlying nutritional status and risks and factors contributing to neural tube defects would be similar. However, some evidence from other countries may not be applicable to the U.S. population. Treatments may not be available or disease prevalence may be very different. For example, the evidence regarding celiac disease from Northern European countries may not be applicable to the U.S. because of the much higher disease prevalence in the latter. Likewise evidence from developing countries were excluded from the evaluation of vitamin supplementation to prevent cancer and cardiovascular disease because of the potential for confounding related to higher rates of malnutrition in those nations.

**COHERENCE TO ASSESS THE CERTAINTY OF INDIRECT EVIDENCE**

The next step in assessing certainty is to determine the coherence of the evidence for the indirect evidence chain. The USPSTF defines coherence as the extent to which the key questions in the indirect evidence chain of the analytic framework can be linked to make an overall assessment of a preventive service’s net benefit. If direct evidence (key question 1) is available, a judgment regarding coherence is likely not needed. For coherence, the USPSTF assesses adequacy of evidence for each key question and whether the key questions can be connected to link the population on the left side of the framework to the beneficial or harmful health outcomes on the right side of the framework. Coherence is not a simple summation of the adequacy of evidence for the key questions, but is determined by answering the critical appraisal questions across the entire analytic framework.

Using screening as an example, when considering the overall linkage coherence for indirect evidence, the USPSTF assesses whether the evidence about the screening test and the evidence about early treatment can be applied to the same population and linked to approximate direct evidence. In cases where the condition is asymptomatic (e.g., for hypertension and low bone density) and where the treatment trials have been conducted on populations similar to asymptomatic patients detected by screening, the body of evidence is coherent. By contrast, the USPSTF did not consider the evidence to be coherent for cognitive impairment screening, because evidence of net benefit came from treatment trials that recruited patients from dementia clinics rather than on asymptomatic persons. Of importance, there must be coherence in the evidence both for benefits and for harms to allow for the assessment of magnitude of net benefit.

Based on answers to the critical appraisal questions for the individual key questions and the overall linkage coherence, the USPSTF makes an overall assessment of the certainty of the evidence, which is categorized as high, moderate, or low (Table 3).

**USE OF EXTRAPOLATION TO ESTIMATE MAGNITUDE OF NET BENEFIT**

When studies do not address all key questions needed to make a recommendation, the USPSTF can next consider whether extrapolation can overcome evidence gaps. A general definition of extrapolation as applied to USPSTF
methods is an estimation of the magnitude of benefit or harm based on extending beyond what was originally studied in screening or treatment trials. Generally, when extrapolation is used, overall certainty is lower than when no extrapolation is used, and this is often reflected in the letter grades for recommendations. However, per USPSTF methods, to make a recommendation using extrapolation, the overall certainty about the net benefit must still be at least moderate.

Examples of how the USPSTF uses extrapolation to estimate net benefit include the following:

1. Extrapolation evidence about intermediate outcomes to health-related outcomes (e.g., the USPSTF extrapolated that a reduction in falls in older adults would result in improved health outcomes)\(^2\,^{1, 22}\);
2. Inference long-term health outcomes based on short-term outcomes (the USPSTF was able to infer that short-term benefits with diet and exercise counseling for patients at cardiovascular risk—improved blood pressure, BMI, and lipid profiles—would result in long-term health benefits)\(^2\,^{25}\);
3. Extrapolation from primary trial data to infer the intervals or duration to deliver a preventive service (e.g., the USPSTF used modeling to extrapolate from the primary trial data to recommend intervals for colorectal cancer screening and the recommended ages for and duration of aspirin therapy)\(^2\,^{26–29}\);
4. Extrapolate the evidence from one preventive service to a newer one (although this is uncommon and highly dependent on how closely related the services are and the context of the rest of the recommendation and the evidence); and
5. Extrapolation findings from one population studied to other relevant primary care populations.

The last use of extrapolation is inter-related with the concept of applicability. As an example, the USPSTF determined when considering the evidence for abdominal aortic aneurysm screening that the results demonstrating benefits in male smokers were not applicable to female smokers because of the lower prevalence and the mixed body of evidence among female smokers and that the USPSTF could not use other data or logic to extrapolate what the net benefit would be for female smokers based on the findings in male smokers.\(^2\,^{30, 31}\)

In all the above examples, the USPSTF extrapolates from existing evidence only when the case for doing so is strong, requiring a high bar of evidence to extrapolate and still deem the certainty of evidence sufficient. The USPSTF may use non-trial evidence (e.g., epidemiologic data, natural history) for extrapolation and when possible will use formal methodologic approaches (e.g., epidemiologic models, decision models) to structure the extrapolation. For example, decision models can help simulate the effects of different interventions or health outcomes;

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### Table 3. USPSTF Levels of Certainty Regarding Net Benefit.

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<th>Level of certainty</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>The available evidence usually includes consistent results from a multitude of well-designed, well-conducted studies in representative primary care populations. These studies assess the effects of the preventive service on the desired health outcomes. Because of the precision of findings, this conclusion is therefore unlikely to be strongly affected by the results of future studies. These recommendations are often based on direct evidence from clinical trials of screening or behavioral interventions. High-quality trials designed as “pragmatic” or “effectiveness” trials are often of greater value in understanding external validity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Moderate           | The available evidence is sufficient to determine the effects of the preventive service on targeted health outcomes, but confidence in the estimate is constrained by factors such as:  
|                    | - The number, size, or quality of individual studies in the evidence pool  
|                    | - Some heterogeneity of outcome findings or intervention models across the body of studies  
|                    | - Mild to moderate limitations in the generalizability of findings to routine primary care practice. As more information becomes available, the magnitude or direction of the observed effect could change, and this change may be large enough to alter the conclusion |
| Low                | The available evidence is insufficient to assess effects on health outcomes. Evidence is insufficient because of:  
|                    | - The very limited number or size of studies  
|                    | - Inconsistency of direction or magnitude of findings across the body of evidence  
|                    | - Critical gaps in the chain of evidence  
|                    | - Findings are not generalizable to routine primary care practice  
|                    | - A lack of information on prespecified health outcomes  
|                    | - Lack of coherence across the linkages in the chain of evidence  
|                    | More information may allow an estimation of effects on health outcomes. |

USPSTF, U.S. Preventive Services Task Force.
epidemiologic models can project the course of disease or allow inferences about etiology of disease.3

When there is inadequate evidence to make a judgment of the magnitude of net benefit, the USPSTF will not substitute extrapolation for evidence. This principle is exemplified for prostate cancer screening. Epidemiologic data clearly show that African American men have a higher prevalence of prostate cancer and are more likely to suffer harms from prostate cancer, yet the primary U.S. screening trial only included 4% African American men and the European trial did not report race and ethnicity.32–34 The USPSTF considered the findings from the U.S. and European trial data to be applicable to African American men—meaning African American men would be expected to derive at least the same net benefit and harm as other men included in the studies. However, knowing that African American men have a higher prevalence and mortality from prostate cancer does not provide sufficient certainty to extrapolate greater net benefit than observed in the primary trials.35

When extrapolation is used to reach a letter grade recommendation, the scientific rationale for the recommendations and the methods used to review and judge the evidence are explicitly stated in the recommendation statement. If the USPSTF commissions a model, a manuscript detailing the methods and results of the modeling is provided; if existing models are reviewed, they are included in the recommendation statement or in a separate manuscript.

USE OF CONCEPTUAL BOUNDING TO ESTIMATE MAGNITUDE OF NET BENEFIT

Similarly, the USPSTF can next consider whether conceptual bounding can overcome gaps when determining the net benefit. The USPSTF defines conceptual bounding as identifying a theoretical upper or lower bound for benefits or harms. The magnitude of this conceptual bound is used to set a threshold for which the existing direct evidence about the opposing benefits or harms must overcome or be below to say that a service has a net benefit or a net harm. The USPSTF must have at least moderate certainty when setting a conceptual bound in order to have at least moderate certainty in estimating the overall magnitude of net benefit.

When considering conceptual bounding, the USPSTF estimates the likely upper and lower bounds of the benefits or harms in the absence of evidence. Various inputs inform the bounds such as baseline risk of study participants, natural history, epidemiology of health conditions, invasiveness or severity of diagnostic tests or treatment, and applicability of related evidence. Based on a systematic audit of its portfolio, it was determined that the USPSTF used some form of bounding in nearly one quarter of its recommendations.36

A common use of upper threshold bounding by the USPSTF is to bound the benefits or harms as “no greater than small.” This occurs more often for harms than benefits and most often for counseling services—the harms of nearly half of counseling recommendations are bounded as no greater than small. This is exemplified in the tobacco smoking–cessation counseling recommendation in which studies did not report harms related to counseling but the USPSTF bounded these harms as no greater than small because counseling is non-invasive and unlikely to result in serious physical or psychologic harms.37 For benefits, if the magnitude of benefit is estimated only from studies of an intervention conducted by highly trained clinicians using specialized equipment for persons at higher risk, the observed benefit might be considered the upper bound that might reasonably be anticipated in the general population, where the population is lower risk and the setting has less-experienced clinicians. When considering screening for carotid artery stenosis, trials selected higher risk patients with carotid artery stenosis and compared carotid endarterectomy performed by skilled surgeons to an outdated medical management (many trial participants were not on lipid-lowering medications). Using this as an upper bound for benefit, the USPSTF found that observed benefits would not outweigh harms and thus there is no net benefit and likely harm with screening asymptomatic patients in primary care.38

Often less evidence about potential harms for screening exists, compared with evidence about potential benefits. In such situations, the USPSTF may draw general conclusions from evidence on expected yield of screening in terms of false-positive test results. If the prevalence of the condition is low and the specificity of the test is <100%, the positive predictive value may be low and false-positive test results will be expected. If the diagnostic workup is invasive or otherwise carries clinically important potential for harm, as exemplified by screening for ovarian cancer,39 the USPSTF can infer that at least some harms will result from screening, because some persons with false-positive screening tests will undergo an invasive diagnostic protocol for no possible benefit. Similarly, if overdiagnosis (and therefore labeling and overtreatment) is common, and if the treatment has some adverse effects, the USPSTF may infer that implementation of routine screening will cause at least some incremental harms, even in the absence of studies that characterize harms. This approach establishes a floor for harms and recognizes that the harms must at least be greater than what is known about the number of false-positives, the invasiveness of the
diagnostic workup, inappropriate labeling, and the expected amount of overtreatment.

Whenever the USPSTF uses conceptual bounding, it specifically calls attention to the use in the recommendation statement. For example, language from the recommendation about primary care interventions to support breastfeeding explicitly say, “There is adequate evidence to bound the potential harms of interventions to support breastfeeding as no greater than small, based on the nature of the intervention, the low likelihood of serious harms, and the available information from studies reporting few harms.”410

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The USPSTF continually works to advance the methods it uses to make recommendations about preventive services. The USPSTF strives to ensure that when it makes a recommendation with an A, B, C, or D grade that there is at a minimum moderate certainty of positive or zero/negative net magnitude of benefit. At the same time, the USPSTF is careful to not solely wait until there is incontrovertible evidence to judge the magnitude of net benefit, as it could run the risk of leading to patient harm by either overuse of an ineffective service or underuse of an effective service.411 The use of applicability and coherence are key to understanding the certainty of the evidence and extrapolation and conceptual bounding in select circumstances can be used to estimate the magnitude of net benefit.

The USPSTF will continue to revisit and advance these concepts, both through evaluation of its past use of these strategies and observation of other bodies working to make evidence-based recommendations. Specific areas that deserve further attention include the role of modeling, further considerations to define when these methods are inappropriate, communicating use of these methods, the role of new data sources, and future methods advancements.

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