

Participate in Clinical Research:

Volunteer or Guinea Pig?

Progress in medical science has come a long way. New and more effective treatment have been implemented, better clinical care and better understanding of the diseases and patients now have higher chances of recovering. All these will not happen without the contribution from research participants.

The common perception of clinical studies, or rather, clinical trials, is that the volunteers are like guinea pigs. They are subjected to tests on new drugs which carry high risks.

What is clinical research?

Clinical research refers to research or study of health and diseases in human. It helps doctors and healthcare professionals understand a disease, develop new treatment There are many types of clinical research and they can be classified into two main categories: Observational studies or interventional studies. (See Table 1)

Types of Clinical Research

| Type | Description | Examples |
|--|---|---|
| Observational Studies | These studies aim to understand the cause-and-effect relationships of treatment and the outcomes. | E.g. epidemiological studies, cohort studies (please see article on "What Makes a Good Life") |
| Interventional Studies / Clinical Trials | These studies aim to investigate the effect and safety of a new treatment or device or a new purpose for the current treatment or device. | E.g. Clinical trials (phases 1 – 4) for new treatment or device |

Table 1: Types of clinical research

Why participate?

There are many reasons that individuals participate in clinical research. Sometimes they offer new treatment alternative to current one, before they are available to the public. Some may want to contribute to improving knowledge and care for others who are in the same conditions.

Is it risky or dangerous?

Of course, all research is not 100% risk-free. All clinical research are under very strict radar of ethical and regulatory checks to ensure that the studies are carried out safely and ethically. Ethics committee review and approve the studies to protect the rights of participants.



Figure 1: Processes involved in clinical research

Participation is Voluntary

Participation is voluntary. If you are keen to participate in a study, the process of the study will be explained to you. The benefits and risks will be highlighted and you will be given time to consider carefully. During this period, the study team will also answer any questions you have.

Participation in clinical research plays an important part in the advancement of medical science. It helps healthcare professionals to better understand a disease condition, a new therapy or quality of health in a community so that appropriate care can be given. Who knows? The new treatment you participated in may be a solution to a disease condition.

Further reading:
 Health Sciences Authority (www.hsa.gov.sg)
 Food and Drug Administration (www.fda.gov)