



## Social Risk Trial FAQ

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### Frequently Asked Questions

What is the 2017-2021 social risk trial?

The purpose of social risk trial is to improve the understanding of the impact of social risk factors on the results of performance measures. NQF endorses performance measures for both quality improvement and accountability purposes. Examples of accountability purposes include public reporting or value-based purchasing. It is more important than ever to ensure that NQF-endorsed measures fairly and accurately assess provider performance given that public and private sector payers and purchasers rely on value-based purchasing to reduce healthcare spending while improving quality. Recent work conducted by NQF and reports from National Academy of Medicine (NAM) and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) show that individuals' social risk factors impact their health and health outcomes. Including social risk factors in risk adjustment models is one strategy to ensure that accountability programs truly reflect the quality of care provided and that providers are rewarded or penalized fairly.

However, there are concerns that adjusting performance measures for social risk factors will mask disparities in care. Prior to 2014, NQF's policy prohibited the inclusion of social risk factors in the risk adjustment models of NQF-endorsed measures to address those concerns. Informed by the increasing evidence of the impact of these factors and recommendations from NQF's 2014 Risk Adjustment Expert Panel, the NQF Board of Directors approved a two-year trial period in 2015 that allowed measures submitted for endorsement consideration to include risk adjustment for social factors. At the conclusion of the trial period in 2017, the NQF Board of Directors reviewed the results and determined that there was need to launch a new social risk trial to learn more about social risk adjustment and quality measurement.

What were the results of NQF's 2015-2017 trial period?

During the self-funded trial, NQF considered risk adjustment for 303 measures across 16 topic areas. Of the measures reviewed, 93 measures included clinical or some other form of risk adjustment. Of these, 65 measures had a conceptual basis for social risk adjustment, and 17 of these measures were endorsed with social risk adjustment.

NQF issued a [report of its findings](#) from the trial, including potential approaches to adjust and stratify social risk data to provide greater transparency of healthcare disparities. [NQF's Disparities Standing Committee](#) provided oversight and evaluation of the trial. This work enhanced the development of NQF's *Roadmap to Achieving Health Equity and Eliminating Disparities* and resulted in the establishment of the NQF Health Equity Program.

Why is NQF launching a new trial?

The first trial period demonstrated that adjusting measures for social risk factors is feasible but challenging. The initial trial found that the impact of social risk factors varies by measures and that limitations in data can hamper efforts to sufficiently capture social risk. In July 2017, the NQF Board of Directors approved a new three-year initiative, allowing outcome measures submitted for endorsement to include social risk factors. As part of this trial, NQF will explore unresolved issues that surfaced in the 2015-2017 social risk factor trial, including:

- Clarifying the preferred methodology to identify a conceptual basis for adjustment;
- Providing guidance for measure developers on risk factor selection and on the empirical analyses to support adjustment;
- Exploring alternative data sources, including use of commercial data sets and community-level data, and providing greater guidance to the field on how to obtain and measure advanced social risk factors;
- Exploring the impact of social risk adjustment on reimbursement and access to care, including the impact of implementation of measures in value-based purchasing on providers caring for populations at extremes of social risk; and
- Considering opportunities to reduce disparities as part of NQF's measure endorsement and selection work.

This new Social Risk Trial will help inform a decision on whether to permanently change NQF's policy to allow social risk adjustment for outcome measures.

What are the dates of the new social risk trial?

The new Social Risk Trial began with the Fall 2017 CDP Cycle and will conclude in 2021.

What measures are included in the Social Risk Trial?

All measures submitted for NQF endorsement are considered to be part of the Social Risk Trial.

How is 2017-2021 social risk trial different from the 2015-2017 trial?

The findings from the first trial period informed a number of policy and methodological questions that need to be addressed prior to a permanent change to NQF's policy. First, NQF is collecting additional information from measure developers to support the Standing Committee's review of risk adjustment models. In addition, we are examining additional details on how the model was developed and the risk factors that were considered. Next, NQF has convened the Scientific Methods Panel to provide guidance on the appropriateness of the methods used by a measure developer. Finally, NQF will provide stakeholders with the opportunity to provide meaningful input into the review and appropriateness of a measure.

What is the role of the Methods Panel?

One recommendation from the 2017 redesign of the Consensus Development Process (CDP) was the creation of a Scientific Methods Panel that would help ensure rigorous and more consistent evaluation of the scientific acceptability of complex measures. The task of the Scientific Methods Panel is to evaluate complex measures for the scientific acceptability criterion, by focusing on reliability and validity analyses and results. Specifically, the Methods Panel will continue to review these measures and provide guidance on the appropriateness of the risk adjustment methods. The Panel's review will help inform the standing committee's endorsement decision.

What is the role of the Disparities Standing Committee?

The Disparities Standing Committee will provide guidance on the 2017-2021 Social Risk Adjustment Trial and input to ensure such adjustment will not worsen healthcare disparities.

What is the role of the Standing Committees?

The standing committees will make recommendations for measure endorsement. As part of their review, the standing committees will continue to consider whether there is a conceptual and empirical basis to risk adjust for social risk factors.