

Optimizing clinical nutrition research: the role of adaptive and pragmatic trials

Camila E. Orsso¹, Katherine L. Ford^{1,2}, Nicole Kiss³, Elaine B. Trujillo⁴, Colleen K. Spees⁵, Jill M. Hamilton-Reeves^{6,7}, Carla M. Prado^{1,*}

¹Human Nutrition Research Unit, Department of Agricultural, Food & Nutritional Science, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada.

²Department of Kinesiology & Health Sciences, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Canada

³Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition, Deakin University, Geelong, Australia.

⁴Division of Cancer Prevention, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Rockville, MD, USA.

⁵Division of Medical Dietetics, School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, The Ohio State University College of Medicine, Columbus, OH, USA.

⁶Department of Urology, University of Kansas Medical Center, Kansas City, KS, USA.

⁷Department of Dietetics and Nutrition, University of Kansas Medical Center, Kansas City, KS, USA.

*Corresponding Author:

Professor Carla M. Prado, PhD, RD

2-021 Li Ka Shing Centre for Health Innovation

University of Alberta

Edmonton, AB, Canada T6G 2E1

Tel: 780.492.7934 / Fax: 780.492.9555

Email: Carla.prado@ualberta.ca

Abstract

Evidence-based nutritional recommendations address the health impact of suboptimal nutritional status. Efficacy randomized controlled trials (RCTs) have traditionally been the preferred method for determining the effects of nutritional interventions on health outcomes. Nevertheless, obtaining a holistic understanding of intervention efficacy and effectiveness in real-world settings is stymied by inherent constraints of efficacy RCTs. These limitations are further compounded by the complexity of nutritional interventions and the intricacies of the clinical context. Herein, we explore the advantages and limitations of alternative study designs (e.g., adaptive and pragmatic trials), which can be incorporated into RCTs to optimize the efficacy or effectiveness of interventions in clinical nutrition research.

Efficacy RCTs often lack external validity due to their fixed design and restrictive eligibility criteria, leading to efficacy-effectiveness and knowledge translation gaps. Adaptive trials improve the evaluation of nutritional intervention efficacy through planned study modifications, such as recalculating sample sizes or discontinuing a study arm. Pragmatic trials are embedded within clinical practice or conducted in settings that resemble standard of care, enabling a more comprehensive assessment of intervention effectiveness. Pragmatic trials often rely on patient-oriented primary outcomes, acquire outcome data from electronic health records, and employ broader eligibility criteria. Consequently, adaptive and pragmatic trials facilitate the prompt implementation of evidence-based nutritional recommendations into clinical practice.

Recognizing the limitations of efficacy RCTs and the potential advantages of alternative trial designs is essential for bridging efficacy-effectiveness and knowledge translation gaps.

Ultimately, this awareness will lead to a greater number of patients benefiting from evidence-based nutritional recommendations.

Introduction

Suboptimal nutritional status contributes to the development and progression of chronic diseases and predicts mortality¹⁻³. Inadequate energy and nutrient intakes are hallmarks of suboptimal nutritional status and are associated with low muscle mass and malnutrition, which are prevalent among older adults and patients with acute or chronic diseases⁴⁻⁶. Although the pathophysiology of these conditions is multifactorial, adequate energy and nutrient intakes are essential for optimizing health outcomes. As such, alterations in dietary patterns, food and/or supplement intake have been explored to improve nutritional status and minimize the impact of related conditions^{7,8}.

Efficacy randomized controlled trials (RCTs) are common in nutrition research, as they are designed to evaluate the causal effects of nutritional intervention on health outcomes, while controlling for confounding variables under ideal circumstances⁹⁻¹¹. However, clinical conditions and nutritional interventions are complex and may interfere with the ability of efficacy RCTs to negate confounding effects, introducing challenges for data analysis and interpretation^{9,12,13}. Efficacy RCTs also have inherent limitations, namely trial features cannot be changed after study initiation and implementation requires costly and complex infrastructures⁹. These drawbacks became more evident during COVID-19, as researchers had to modify ongoing trials to comply with evolving public health and safety measures.

The rigorous eligibility requirements and methodological diversity in efficacy RCTs pose additional challenges to nutrition research, including low recruitment rates and limited generalizability^{10,12}. Convenience sampling, used to boost recruitment, may substitute for recruiting the intended population, thereby introducing selection bias¹⁴. Trial patients are often those who are most likely to respond positively to nutritional therapy; they are typically younger,

with fewer comorbidities, and have superior nutritional status than those referred for nutritional care¹². Nutritional interventions, outcomes assessments, and condition definitions lack uniformity, further complicating efficacy RCTs^{7,15,16}. These factors together expand the efficacy-effectiveness gap, or the divergent treatment effects in effectiveness RCTs conducted in less controlled, real-world settings¹⁷. The reduced external validity of efficacy RCTs also complicates the translation of evidence into clinical practice, known as the knowledge translation gap^{18,19}. Although nutrition guidelines are typically established using evidence from systematic reviews and meta-analyses of efficacy RCTs, inconclusive findings are common due to stringent eligibility criteria, high methodological heterogeneity, inconsistent results, few trials with low risk of bias, and/or insufficient statistical power^{7,15,16}. Hence, clinical nutrition guidelines often include expert consensus or observational study data, which are more prone to bias than RCTs^{20–23}.

More flexible methodologies, such as adaptive and pragmatic designs, provide a valuable avenue to address limitations of efficacy RCTs, bridge research gaps, and benefit patients and healthcare systems through the provision of evidence-based nutritional care⁹. These alternative designs, when incorporated into RCTs, can enhance either intervention efficacy or effectiveness. Adaptive designs permit preplanned trial modifications after initiation based on analysis of accrued data²⁴. Hiremath et al.²⁵ employ an adaptive design to determine the most effective approach for increasing potassium intake in patients with hypertension. Patients first receive individualized nutritional counseling in line with current guidelines; non-responders receive potassium supplementation if interim analysis at week four reveals unmet intake goals, while responders continue with nutritional counseling alone for one year²⁵. Modifications to an ongoing trial can enhance recruitment, dose-response assessment, precision of treatment effect

estimates, and implementation²⁶. Conversely, pragmatic trials adopt a patient-oriented, real-world approach to assess intervention effectiveness within the routine patient care context²⁷. Schuetz et al.²⁸ used a pragmatic design to evaluate a protocol-guided individualized nutritional support for patients at nutritional risk. This pragmatic design encompassed a larger, more diverse patient group; healthcare professionals delivered interventions tailored to patients' needs; comparisons were made with best available treatment modalities; study visits were integrated into routine clinical follow-ups; and patient-oriented outcomes were measured^{27,28}. Pragmatic trials are designed to inform practitioners and policy/decision-makers of intervention advantages and limitations in a pragmatic setting, thus enabling swift integration of innovative nutritional therapies into standard clinical practice²⁹.

Adaptive and pragmatic trial designs are rigorous and provide high-quality data to establish and inform evidence for preventing and managing complex nutrition-related health conditions^{24,30,31}. In this narrative review, we explore the potential for adaptive and pragmatic trials to advance the field of clinical nutrition research. We discuss common pitfalls of nutrition-focused efficacy RCTs and the impact of COVID-19 on clinical nutrition research. Key aspects of incorporating alternative designs into nutrition trials are examined, along with specific examples. We also propose the use of alternative designs in oncology nutrition research and mobile health (mHealth) interventions. Articles discussed here were identified in Medline, PubMed, or Google Scholar using keywords related to the following topics up to February 2023: strengths and weakness of efficacy RCTs; COVID-19 impact on research processes; study designs in clinical nutrition research; adaptive and pragmatic trials; nutrition trials in oncology; and mHealth interventions.

The Shortcomings of Efficacy RCTs in Nutrition Research

Efficacy RCTs are conducted in highly controlled settings using rigorous strategies from study development to data analysis^{9–11}. These trials are preferred over observational studies in free-living conditions because, when properly used, they minimize bias from confounding factors and begin to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between an intervention and health outcome^{9,32}. Randomization is a key feature of RCTs that minimizes bias by comparing baseline characteristics of groups and inferring treatment effect⁹. Among randomization approaches, stratifying patients based on similar prognostic factors—such as age, sex, and disease stage—results in more balanced groups but requires larger samples to maintain statistical power, especially with multiple strata³³. Additional randomization-related issues are observed in nutrition trials, including failure to conceal allocation and/or to maintain allocation ratio, which can modify the cause-and-effect relationship³⁴.

Controlling for dietary intake is another challenge of efficacy RCTs^{10,12}. Patients in these trials often receive nutritional interventions in designated clinical research units or are provided prepared meals for the entire, or partial, study duration. A controlled-feeding trial provides all meals for on-site or off-site consumption and allows for precise quantification of food composition while minimizing the confounding effects of usual diet^{10,35}. Nevertheless, controlled-feeding trials rarely use appropriate nutrient analytics to assess dietary composition. Seasonality, soil, and stage of ripeness can influence phytochemical and nutrient composition of diets, affecting predicted effect or reproducibility of study results^{36,37}. Controlled-feeding trials can be costly, burdensome to patients, and limited in their real-world applicability^{10,35}.

Blinding is common in efficacy RCTs but is not possible or practical in many nutritional interventions, particularly those that require patients to alter dietary intake, resulting in study arm

contamination¹⁰. Nutritional supplement trials often use a double-blind design where both patients and outcome assessors are unaware of trial arm allocation¹⁰. Control arm patients receive a placebo supplement of similar taste, color, and consistency to the trial intervention, an approach viewed as more robust³⁸. While dietary confounders can be managed by collecting usual dietary intake data and using nutritional biomarkers for adherence, these approaches can be costly and imprecise³⁹.

Efficacy RCTs have restrictive eligibility criteria aimed at excluding other known confounders such as comorbidities, medication use, habitual dietary patterns (including the use of supplements, botanicals, and herbals), exercise patterns, malabsorption disorders, and food allergies/intolerances that may modify outcome(s)^{10,12}. However, these restrictive criteria can challenge recruitment goals and limit generalizability. For instance, RCTs examining the effects of nutritional supplements on outcomes of patients with cancer excluded those with a substantial weight loss history, and/or those with low performance status and comorbidities^{40–42}. Although these trials provide evidence of the supplementation effects, their generalizability is unclear given the restrictive eligibility criteria.

Efficacy RCTs use precise and valid techniques to minimize measurement errors when assessing outcomes. Although these techniques are increasingly available, they are not universally used in clinical settings and are often reserved for research purposes. Efficacy RCTs can accurately quantify muscle mass and/or related compartments using body composition techniques, including dual-energy X-ray absorptiometry, bioelectrical impedance analysis, and computed tomography; however, not all clinical settings have the capacity to employ them. Dietary exposure biomarkers, such as plasma carotenoids, urine polyphenols, fecal microbiome, and hair cortisol, are frequently used in research but are impractical in clinical settings due to

high costs and complex laboratory analysis³⁹. These techniques are gaining ground in clinical practice and aiding in closing this gap, though they may be restricted to specific settings. The absence of precise and valid techniques makes monitoring and evaluating of nutritional interventions difficult in clinical settings, with results potentially differing between techniques used in efficacy RCTs versus real-world clinical settings⁴³.

Efficacy RCTs are robust yet lack flexibility and are burdensome for patients¹⁰. These shortcomings are particularly relevant when trial protocol adjustments are warranted to mitigate extenuating circumstances, such as during COVID-19, strikes or regulatory changes⁴⁴.

Unplanned trial modifications can introduce bias that alters cause-and-effect relationships. The *CONSERVE 2021 (CONSORT and SPIRIT Extension for RCTs Revised in Extenuating Circumstances)* statement was released as an extension to the core *CONSORT 2010 (Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials)* and *SPIRIT 2013 (Standard Protocol Items: Recommendations for Interventional Trials)* to guide the reporting of RCTs that underwent significant protocol amendments due to extenuating circumstances⁴⁴. Unless extenuating circumstances apply, researchers conducting efficacy RCTs should determine and maintain the required sample size before the study initiation. However, trialists may fail to correctly estimate an *a priori* sample size due to a paucity of related research, leading to an insignificant treatment effect^{10,14}. Patient burden is also high in efficacy RCTs due to comprehensive study protocols that may increase attrition¹⁰. This may be amplified in clinical populations already experiencing disease- and treatment-related side effects⁴⁵. For example, patients with cancer frequently encounter issues with vein access, which can make obtaining blood samples for research purposes a considerable challenge. Patients may need to travel to research facilities for study visits, undergo additional measurements, and/or change their habitual dietary patterns during trial

participation. Therefore, efficacy RCTs may hinder valid findings and successful implementation and scaling of nutritional interventions.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Nutrition Research

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced numerous challenges for efficacy RCTs. Many non-essential research activities were halted to prioritize patient and research staff safety^{46–48}. Consequently, efficacy RCTs impacted by public health and safety measures faced one or more of the following: mandatory study cancellation, delayed in-person study visits, early termination due to low recruitment rate, increased attrition rate, limited funding support, incomplete outcome data collection and dissemination^{46–48}. These factors are likely to result in missing outcome data, affecting study validity and the strength of future meta-analyses used to inform clinical guidelines⁴⁹. Additionally, patients may have experienced changes to habitual dietary and physical activity patterns, and mental and/or physical health, all of which can impact ongoing trials⁵⁰. The disruption to research during COVID-19 will likely have a long-term effect on knowledge mobilization, although the effects are yet to be fully elucidated. Such challenges emphasize the need for improved research processes and alternative trial designs to overcome the pitfalls of efficacy RCTs.

Conversely, the COVID-19 pandemic unexpectedly prompted improvements in overall research processes. Long-standing methodological issues, including challenges with research ethics board and/or regulatory approvals, and patient recruitment and enrollment, became more evident during the pandemic⁵¹. As a result, researchers and funding agencies prioritized high-quality research that could be conducted in a timely and cost-effective manner. This shift led to enhanced approval processes, including options for remote patient recruitment and electronic

consent^{52–54}. Research design and processes also evolved to incorporate technology-delivered interventions, monitoring, data collection, and dissemination of findings⁵⁵. Improved Internet access or telehealth services billing processes were rapidly implemented, allowing underserved populations—those living in rural communities and older adults—to participate in research^{56,57}.

Adaptive Trials: Definition and Main Characteristics

Adaptive trials allow for pre-planned methodological modifications based on ongoing data collection without compromising the validity or integrity of results^{24,26,58}. The adaptive design is particularly relevant when uncertainties arise during trial planning (e.g., ideal target population; duration and/or intensity of intervention)⁵⁸. Trial modifications are not arbitrary; they are carefully considered before study initiation and guided by pre-defined, data-based criteria.

Examples of trial adaptations include sample size recalculation; broadening eligibility criteria to include patients most likely to benefit from the intervention; dropping an ineffective study arm; escalating treatment dose; comparing multiple treatment arms with a control arm over multiple stages; and early termination based on efficacy, futility, or safety results^{24,26,58} (**Figure 1**). Another common adaptive strategy employs the Bayesian method, allowing researchers to select pre-planned adaptations based on predictions of follow-up parameter distribution and probability of trial success⁵⁹. Researchers can opt to use one or more adaptive strategies although predetermined interim analyses—preliminary statistical analyses or review of collected data—are recommended²⁴.

Documenting and sharing general information with the public, such as continuation or early termination of dose groups, is unlikely to bias trial continuation⁶⁰. However, to support decision transparency and ensure interim analyses results are unbiased, adaptation details,

including statistical decision rules and probability thresholds, should be made available upon trial completion⁶⁰. Researchers may keep critical details of adaptations confidential while the study is ongoing to avoid operational bias^{24,60}. The *ACE (Adaptive designs CONSORT Extension)* statement provides standards for publishing adaptive trials to ensure transparency²⁴.

Pragmatic Trials: Definition and Main Characteristics

Pragmatic trials evaluate the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions in real-world settings, or where they would be implemented, if successful²⁷. Typically embedded within clinical settings, pragmatic trials often compare outcome measures between intervention group(s) and standard of care³⁰ (**Figure 2**). Pragmatic trials select a patient-oriented primary outcome that is relevant to and/or informed by patients³⁰. Their eligibility criteria reflect the patient population that would receive the intervention in standard of care, enhancing generalizability²⁷. Due to diverse patient populations, larger sample sizes are required to control for confounders and maintain statistical power, compared to efficacy RCTs⁶¹. Furthermore, methodological aspects such as recruitment, research setting, care delivery, and follow-up seek to replicate real-world settings or standard of care. Pragmatic trials may be more feasible than efficacy RCTs and can accelerate knowledge translation into clinical settings^{30,62}.

The modified *PRECIS-2 (Pragmatic Explanatory Continuum Indicator Summary)* is recommended for designing pragmatic trials that meet patients' needs and for assessing pragmatism²⁷. Moreover, an extension of the standard *CONSORT* statement encourages adequate and standardized reporting of pragmatic trials, allowing knowledge users to evaluate the applicability of interventions in specific clinical practice areas³¹.

Advantages of Using Adaptive and Pragmatic Designs in Clinical Nutrition Research

Adaptive trials incorporate methodological components that can advance clinical nutrition research (Figures 1 and 2). A significant advantage of these trials is the flexibility in tailoring intervention to patients' nutritional needs. Adaptive trials with multiple intervention arms can test different doses or composition of food and/or supplements, with interim analyses determining whether treatment arms are included or dropped for the remainder of the study^{9,26}. This strategy helps establish the optimal dose and composition of food and/or supplements for the desired outcome⁶³. Adaptive trial interventions can be extended to evaluate both short- and long-term responses if the interim analysis results are promising²⁴, enabling researchers to identify an optimal treatment time frame that achieves intended effects²⁶. Many RCTs fail to identify intervention efficacy because the trial duration is insufficient to observe a marked physiological response to outcomes, or is shorter than the underlying disease treatment (e.g., chemo(radio)therapy cancer treatment)⁶⁴.

Adaptive design optimizes patient recruitment and enrollment. Interim sample size reassessment allows for modifications of the required number of patients without affecting statistical power²⁴. This is important in clinical populations with limited evidence of nutritional interventions or when earlier studies had heterogeneous populations, designs, and outcomes assessments, as these factors can contribute to an incorrect *a priori* sample size calculations for downstream trials^{14,24}. Adaptive design may also be more ethical than efficacy RCTs as individuals most likely to benefit from the intervention are enrolled after the interim analysis, which is relevant for clinical populations already experiencing disease and treatment burden.

Increased acceptance and use of pragmatic trials can advance clinical nutrition research. These trials are generally embedded within clinical practice allowing patients' needs to be

routinely assessed, monitored, and evaluated. Integration of researchers, patients, and care teams within the practice setting further facilitates optimization of individual nutritional targets⁹. Patients are also followed by their standard of care team to monitor disease progression, enabling adjustment of follow-up assessments to be extended beyond the duration of the intervention. Patient partners and other stakeholders, such as healthcare professionals and hospital managers, are often engaged throughout the research lifecycle, advising on trial aspects and producing meaningful findings⁶⁵. Co-designing trials leads to more acceptable research processes and elicits positive emotions in stakeholders (e.g., confidence, pride), strengthening the bonds between researchers and communities⁶⁶. While not unique to pragmatic designs, the use of electronic health records is common in these trials and enables rapid eligibility screening and the option for a virtual electronic informed-consent process⁶⁷. Electronic health records can also facilitate data collection on healthcare resource utilization and cost-effectiveness analyses. The latter may reduce economic burden in the healthcare system by ensuring implementation of cost-effective interventions. Lastly, broad inclusion criteria promote eligibility and implementation of trials into clinical practice^{26,62}.

Adaptive and pragmatic approaches can improve trial design and promote patient-oriented research and patient-centered care in clinical nutrition. These trials can produce research findings that address patients' unique nutritional needs and reduce patient and healthcare system burden. Recruitment strategies also minimize the likelihood of trial failure due to unsatisfactory enrollment. These factors together may help accelerate the translation of nutrition-focused trial findings to clinical practice and scale-up of interventions to broader practice settings.

Examples of Adaptive and Pragmatic Designs in Nutrition Research

A Medline search conducted up to February 04, 2023 using a combination of keywords related to nutritional interventions (“nutritional therapy”, “diet”, “dietary supplements”) and adaptive or pragmatic trials resulted in 106 records. Among these, 16 nutrition studies employed an adaptive design, and 40 studies utilized a pragmatic design. This search strategy focused on alternative design trials that used the terms “adaptive” or “pragmatic” in their title, abstract, subject heading, and/or author keywords. **Table 1** describes selected examples of nutrition-related adaptive and pragmatic trials. The adaptive trials discussed herein implemented various methodological modifications based on study objectives, while the included pragmatic trials shared similar aspects of trial design.

Challenges Conducting Adaptive and Pragmatic Trials in Clinical Nutrition Research

Adaptive and pragmatic nutrition trials are challenging to plan, implement, and analyze. Compared to efficacy RCTs, these trial designs require additional expertise and time for developing and implementing study protocols^{58,74,75}. For example, obtaining ethics and regulatory approvals may take longer for alternative trials than for efficacy RCTs. While the pandemic has led to streamlined processes, it remains unclear whether these improvements extend to alternative trials. This presents a particular challenge for multicenter trials, where numerous study sites are involved in the approval process, and ethics board reviewers may have limited familiarity with alternative designs.

Challenges that are more relevant but not limited to pragmatic trials include the time needed for engaging with stakeholders and training clinical staff. The time commitment ensures

recruitment rates are feasible and achieved, nutritional interventions are implemented into routine practice, and data are collected per the study protocol (i.e., fidelity)⁷⁴. The need for adequate staffing is also a concern, given the additional time required for study visits, administering the intervention, and assessing study-specific outcomes, particularly in under-resourced settings and in the COVID-19 aftermath⁷⁴. For instance, in United States cancer centers, the ratio of registered dietitian nutritionist to patients with cancer was 1:2,308, with each dietitian evaluating seven patients daily⁷⁶. Insufficient physical infrastructure (e.g., additional clinical space) may also hinder trial implementation.

Outpatient pragmatic trials may struggle to measure dietary intake, control participant's usual diets, or evaluate nutrition-related outcomes. Although self-reported dietary data offers valuable insight into food intake and dietary patterns, there are inherent limitations⁷⁷. For example, misreporting dietary intake is prevalent across assessment tools, body mass index categories, and age groups⁷⁷. Body composition, a common outcome in nutrition trials, can also be difficult to evaluate due to the limited availability of infrastructure or trained personnel for routine assessment⁷⁸. If body composition techniques are inaccessible, surrogate markers of muscle mass (calf or mid-arm circumferences) or fat mass (waist circumference, skinfolds, and body mass index) may be considered⁷⁹. However, surrogate makers lack sensitivity and specificity compared to gold-standard methods and may not accurately reflect the treatment effects of nutritional interventions⁴³, as these effects are often smaller than those of drug treatments. Concerning health record data acquisition, extracting outcome measures can be difficult due to fragmented or complex electronic systems, or the continued use of paper charts.

Treatment contamination in nutrition research challenges alternative designs, particularly pragmatic trials with less restrictive protocols^{10,62}. Factors contributing to study arm

contamination include changes in standard care practices during the trial; limited dietitian availability for delivering interventions in a clinical setting; controls requiring more intensive nutritional therapies that resemble the study intervention; and controls changing eating patterns once introduced to the study or in an effort to improve nutrition-related symptoms (e.g., secondary to anti-cancer treatment). Contamination across study arms can diminish outcome differences in intention-to-treat analysis, potentially leading to failed trials⁸⁰. Statistical approaches to address treatment contamination are discussed elsewhere⁸⁰.

Analyzing and interpreting adaptive and pragmatic trial data can also be difficult. Consulting a statistician during trial planning can help avoid biases in data distribution, treatment effects, confidence intervals, and *p* values²⁶. Cluster randomization is a common approach that may yield misleading statistical analysis³⁴. In cluster randomized trials, groups of patients with similar characteristics—rather than individuals—are randomized to the intervention; however, these trials often fail to account for correlation between individuals in the same cluster, with statistical analysis conducted at the cluster level instead, compromising findings³⁴. These and other issues, along with possible mitigations, are discussed elsewhere^{26,34}. Ultimately, early statistical planning is essential for accurate extrapolation of trial results to clinical practice.

Practical Considerations for Adaptive and Pragmatic Clinical Nutrition Trials

Figures 3 and 4 illustrate practical considerations for conducting adaptive and pragmatic nutrition trials. Substantial effort is required during the planning stage, and appropriate execution and data analysis are crucial for study success and the integration of nutritional interventions into clinical care settings.

Perspectives in Adaptive and Pragmatic Nutrition Trials

Continued efforts in disseminating information that educates users about the diverse aspects of adaptive and pragmatic trials are required to enhance their application in clinical nutrition research^{74,75}. Training should be provided to researchers across all career stages (including trainees), members of ethical and regulatory committees, industry partners, funding agencies, and other stakeholders to expedite planning, funding, approval processes, and delivery of evidence-based results. This training would promote sound planning of alternative nutrition trials, resulting in higher quality evidence. For example, researchers should strive to simplify trial assessments, evaluate patient-oriented outcomes, and engage stakeholders^{65,81,82}. Intervention flexibility should also be considered early, particularly when intervention adjustments are based on patient's emerging needs (e.g., changes in prognosis)⁸².

Several strategies should be explored to enhance research processes in adaptive and pragmatic nutrition trials. For instance, a centralized ethics review could expedite multi-center study initiation and alleviate administrative delays⁸¹. Automated patient screening through electronic health records and electronic, waived, or modified (e.g., verbal) informed consent, could reduce staff workload related to patient recruitment. Recruitment simulation is a tactic that could widen eligibility criteria and improve recruitment and retention⁸¹. Since blinding patients is rare in nutrition trials, approaches to minimize detection bias should include selecting objective outcomes or blinding outcome assessors⁸¹. Researchers ought to evaluate facilities' readiness to implement nutritional interventions into routine care, a vital factor for pragmatic trial success⁸². Lastly, research funding calls emphasizing alternative trial designs in nutrition research are necessary to propel this research field forward⁸¹.

Adaptive and Pragmatic Nutrition Trials in Oncology

Cancer is one of the many clinical conditions that benefit from targeted nutritional care and multimodal approaches for management and optimization of patient outcomes. Although guidelines addressing the nutrition care process for patients with cancer exist, discrepancies in intervention recommendations persist^{21,22,83,84}. This heterogeneity is partly due to limited evidence on nutritional intervention effects, especially during cancer treatment, resulting in recommendations primarily based on expert opinions^{85,86}. Only three of 43 (7.0%) recommendations in the European Society for Clinical Nutrition and Metabolism guidelines on nutrition in cancer were concurrently rated as a high level of evidence and strong level of recommendation²¹. The American Society of Clinical Oncology proposed only two recommendations for nutritional interventions in patients with advanced cancer and cachexia⁸³. Although evidence was from RCTs with at least 20 participants, both recommendations were rated as moderate strength of either low evidence quality or based on informal consensus. Also, patients' nutritional needs vary depending on tumor type, disease stage, treatment modality, and nutrition impact symptoms⁸⁷, adding to the challenges in nutrition research and clinical practice recommendations. Thus, high-quality trials that address the unique nutritional needs of patients with cancer are needed.

Evidence-based recommendations might be limited by insufficient funding for nutritional interventions in cancer. Nutrition research at the United State National Cancer Institute has received less grant funding than other cancer-related areas, with a 44% decline in funded research between 2012–2018 and a decrease in financed clinical trials over the last decades⁸⁸. Most grant applications have focused on mechanisms and dietary supplementation rather than on dietary patterns, and were rarely submitted by dietitians as principal investigators⁸⁸. By providing

additional funding opportunities, nutrition research can be advanced, supporting evidence-based nutritional recommendations in oncology. Adaptive and pragmatic trials offer promising alternatives to efficacy RCTs in oncology nutrition research (**Figure 5**) and have been discussed as strategies to advance the field at the *Pathways to Prevention* workshop, organized by the National Institutes of Health⁸⁶.

Adaptive designs in oncology nutrition can address trial planning uncertainties and target patients' nutritional needs, without further compromising their health or substantially increasing the burden of research participation. This approach can be achieved by testing different doses or compositions of food and/or supplements and stopping the trial early if concerns about safety, efficacy, or futility arise. Adaptations to nutritional interventions should be based on treatment cycles due to suboptimal nutrition intake and low adherence to nutritional interventions during chemotherapy⁶⁴. Nutrition impact symptoms including nausea, anorexia, and mucositis affect patients' appetite and ability to eat or digest food; thus, tailoring interventions to these symptoms may improve nutritional care, nutritional status, and health outcomes in addition to reducing treatment-related toxicities⁸⁹. For example, interventions enhancing acceptability of foods with complex textures can be provided to patients experiencing dysphagia, and nutritional counseling aimed at increasing energy-dense foods can be offered to patients losing weight⁸⁹.

Pragmatic trials can help minimize patient burden during trial participation⁹⁰. Study assessments are typically conducted during follow-up visits with healthcare professionals, eliminating the need for additional visits beyond standard of care. Capturing laboratory information from the electronic medical record may mitigate the need for additional research blood draws in patients with challenging vein access. Pragmatic trials include outcomes relevant to patients with cancer (e.g., quality of life, physical function) and stakeholders (e.g., cost-

effectiveness analysis). Additionally, pragmatic trials' broader eligibility criteria make their findings generalizable to more patients receiving care⁹⁰. This ensures equal access to trials and nutritional care for older or less fit patients, who are often excluded from oncology trials⁹¹. Pragmatic trials may be appealing to dietitians, as they can be involved in research while providing patient care; however, this might not be feasible in cancer centers with a shortage of nutritional care staff⁷⁶. Currently, only a few dietitians hold doctoral degrees, apply for, and receive funding for oncology nutrition research⁸⁸. As pragmatic trials in nutrition are carried out, this situation may evolve.

When conducting alternative trials in oncology nutrition (Figure 5), researchers may face additional challenges beyond those already discussed. Issues such as treatment discontinuation, shifting from a curative to palliative intent, loss to follow-up, and poor adherence or compliance to interventions are common in this patient population⁹⁰. During trial design and data analysis, statistical approaches accounting for missing data must be discussed and implemented to minimize treatment efficacy or effectiveness bias. Blinding can be challenging, and an unblinded approach might affect clinician-reported outcomes (e.g., treatment delays, dose-reductions) and patient-reported outcomes (e.g., quality of life)⁹⁰. Low accrual rate is another common obstacle in oncology nutrition trials⁹².

The REthinking Clinical Trials (REaCT) Program⁹³ was developed to address these barriers in oncology clinical trials through pragmatic research. As the largest initiative of its kind in Canada, it has conducted over 20 trials to date⁹³. The REaCT program employs pragmatic trial design and the implementation of commonly used cancer therapies. Additionally, it conducts surveys with stakeholders to define research questions and performs cost-effectiveness analysis to evaluate interventions' economic impact⁹³. The REaCT program serves as a model for

advancing the use of alternative designs in oncology nutrition research and other chronic conditions.

Adaptive and Pragmatic Nutrition Trials using Mobile Health Interventions

Adaptive and pragmatic nutrition trials can improve mHealth interventions^{94,95}. mHealth applications enable the delivery of interventions (e.g., behavioral interventions to improve nutrition management) or provide healthcare professionals with a platform for screening and assessment. These applications can also collect data for research purposes or link to electronic health records⁹⁴. Moreover, mHealth interventions can be conducted remotely, seamlessly integrating into patients' daily routines.

mHealth interventions incorporate various features to optimize delivery of nutritional support, intervention adherence, and outcome assessments⁹⁶. Nutritional programs may include asynchronous and synchronous cooking videos, telenutrition counseling, food delivery, and recipe databases. Wearable devices, text messaging, customized push notifications, and gamification features are often employed as motivators or reinforcers to boost adherence⁹⁷. Platforms can also offer diverse dietary intake tracking methods, such as food diaries, photo-based assessment, and barcode/QR code scanner for food products⁹⁸. Together, these mHealth features may address limitations of efficacy RCTs.

mHealth interventions hold potential for spread and scale, especially when stakeholders participate in the study design. Adaptive designs emerge as a valuable approach to develop and test new mHealth applications, as multiple updates are needed to add new features, resolve technical issues, and enhance content. Interim analysis of user engagement data can inform these

updates⁹⁵. Therefore, adaptive and pragmatic designs can effectively test well-established or newly developed mHealth interventions to optimize nutritional care.

Conclusions

Well-planned adaptive and pragmatic nutrition trials hold the potential to generate high-quality evidence, enhance generalizability, and expedite the implementation of interventions into patient care. By employing these trials, the availability of evidence-based nutritional recommendations that address both efficacy-effectiveness and knowledge translation gaps can be accelerated. While there are limitations, adaptive and pragmatic trials should be considered as valuable approaches to clinical nutrition research. Rather than dismissing efficacy RCTs, which are feasible and appropriate for answering certain research questions, we encourage nutrition researchers to recognize their limitations and consider alternative trial designs, where appropriate. Continuous effort in training nutrition researchers and health research stakeholders on alternative designs is crucial for promoting the appropriate use of adaptive and pragmatic nutrition trials.

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Author Contribution Statement

CEO and CMP designed research; CEO and KLF conducted literature search; CEO, KLF, and CMP contributed to writing—original draft preparation; CEO, KLF, NK, EBT, CKS, JHR, and CMP contributed to writing—review and editing. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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Ethical Approval

Not applicable because this is review article and it does not include research with human or animal subjects.

Competing Interests

CEO has received honoraria from Abbott Nutrition. CMP has previously received honoraria and/or paid consultancy from Abbott Nutrition, Nutricia, Nestlé Health Science, Fresenius Kabi, AMRA Medical, and Pfizer. NK has received honoraria and/or paid consultancy from Abbott Australasia. KLF, EBT, CKS, JHR – no conflicts of interest.

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Figure Legends

Figure 1. Adaptive trial modifications and advantages in the field of clinical nutrition research.

Figure 2. Features of pragmatic trials and their advantages in clinical nutrition research.

Figure 3. Key elements to consider when planning, executing, and analyzing adaptive trials in clinical nutrition. *ACE, *Adaptive designs Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials (CONSORT) Extension*, (available at <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13063-020-04334-x>²⁴).

Figure 4. Key elements for researchers to consider when planning, executing, and analyzing pragmatic nutrition trials. *PRECIS-2, *PRagmatic Explanatory Continuum Indicator Summary* (available at <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.h2147>²⁷); †CONSORT Extension, *Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials Extension* (available at <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.a2390>³¹).

Figure 5. Advantages and challenges of conducting adaptive and pragmatic trials in oncology nutrition research.

Figure 1

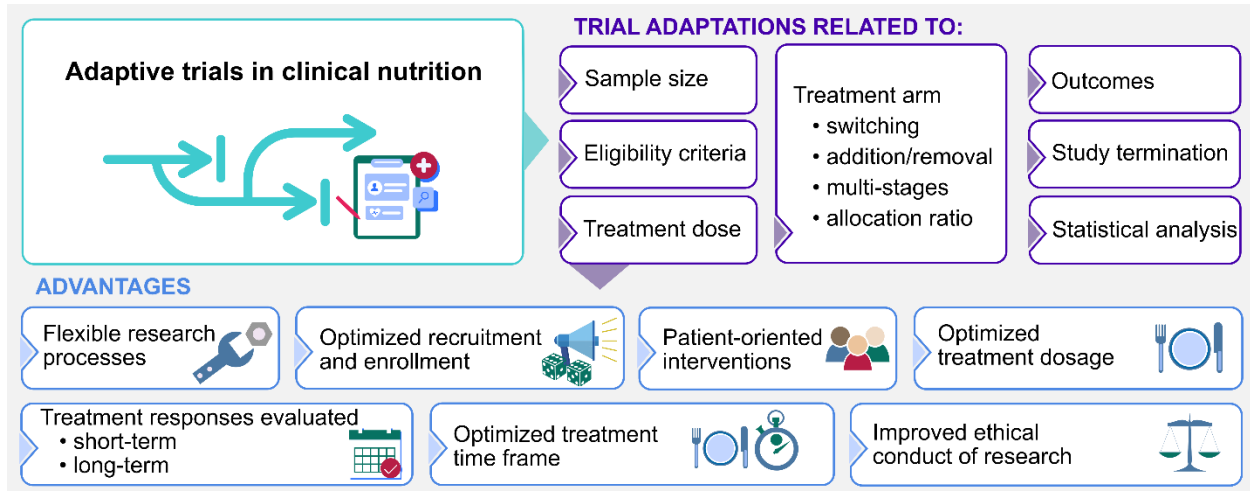


Figure 2

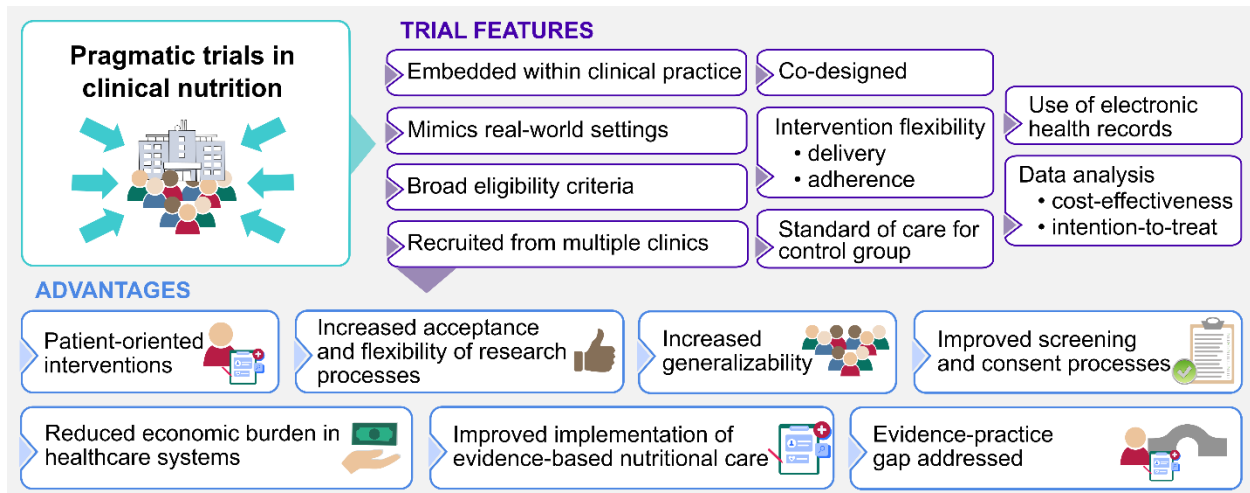


Figure 3

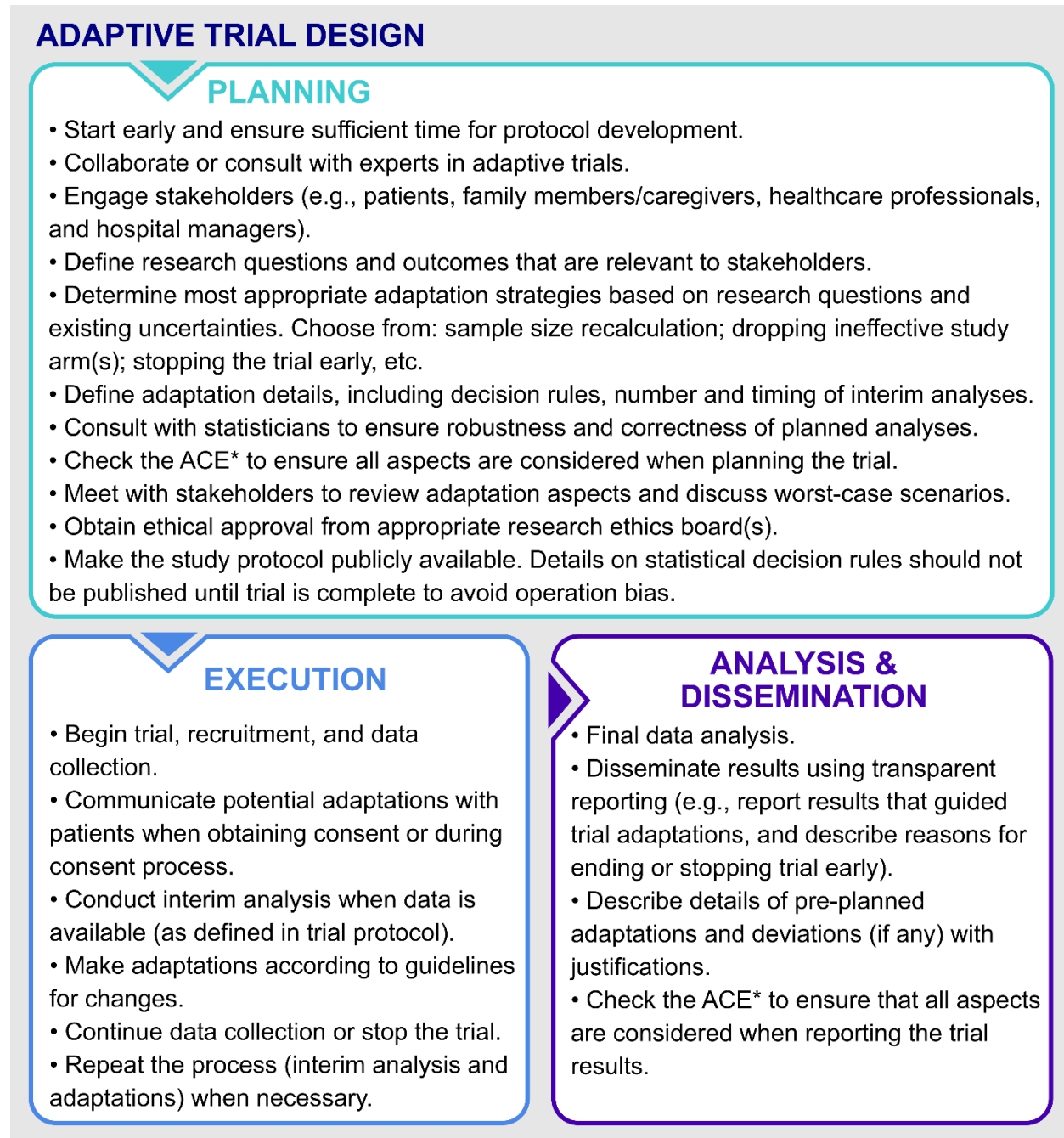


Figure 4

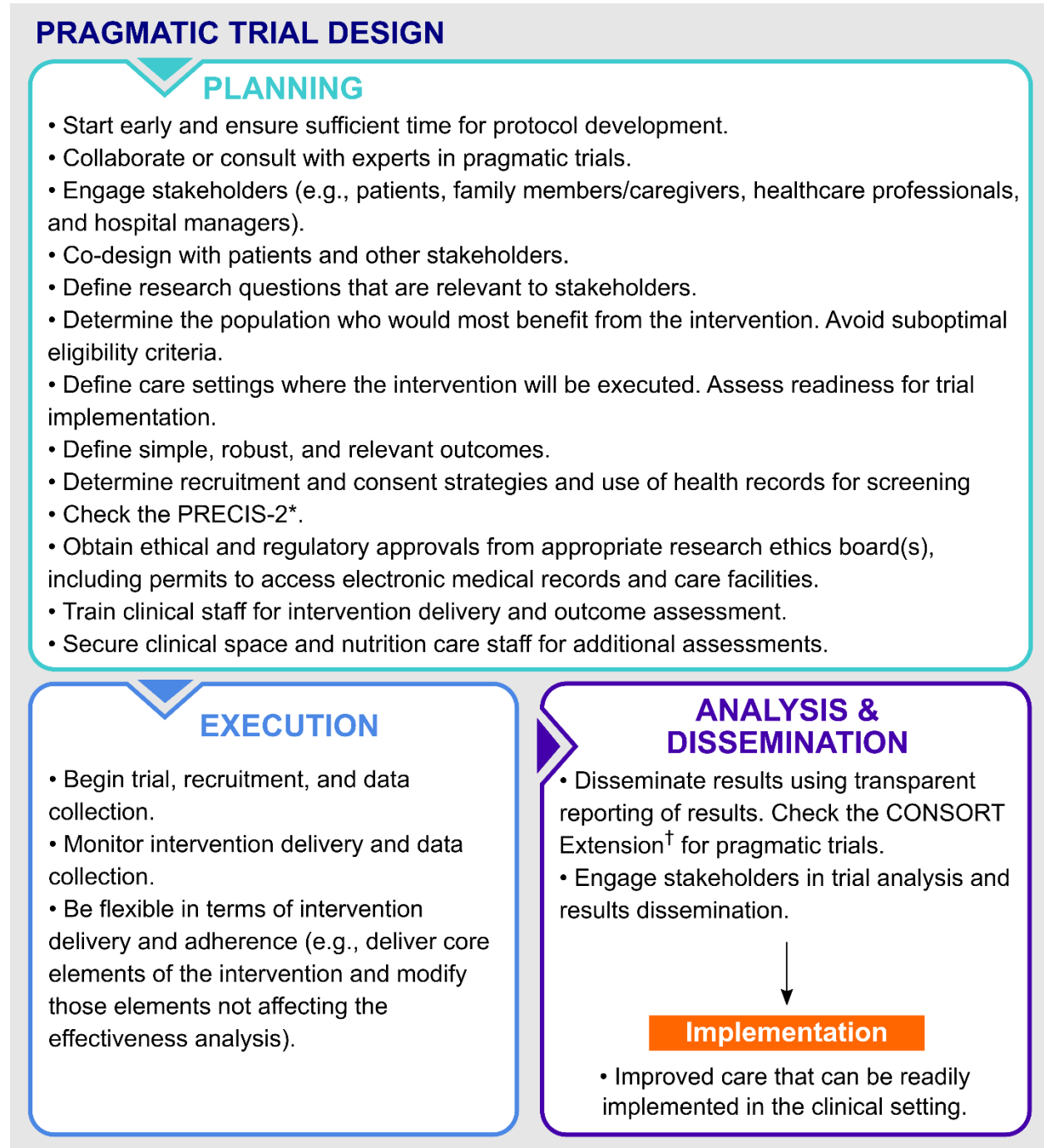


Figure 5

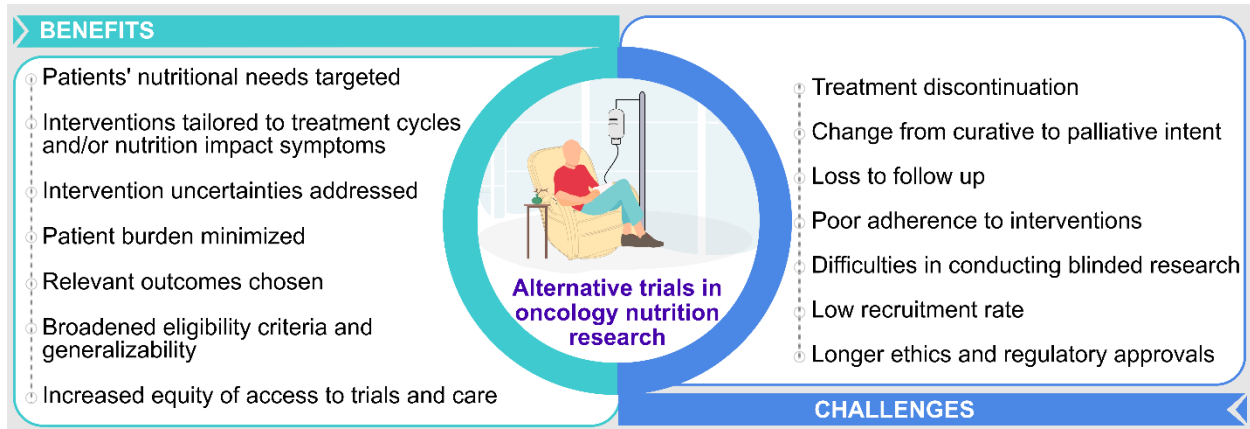


Table 1. Select examples of clinical nutrition trials that used adaptive or pragmatic designs.

Author, year ^[ref]	Study objective	Adaptive or pragmatic components
<i>Adaptive trials</i>		
Hiremath, 2022 ²⁵	To determine an effective strategy for increasing potassium intake in individuals with hypertension and low potassium intake.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two-stage intervention: patients not increasing potassium intake after 4 weeks of nutrition counseling received additional potassium supplementation. Those who were successful in increasing potassium at 4 weeks continued to receive nutrition counseling for one additional year (no potassium supplement was given).
Carlson, 2021 ⁶⁸	To determine if a prenatal supplement of 1000 mg docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) would be more effective than 200 mg DHA to lower the rate of early preterm birth.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bayesian adaptive design: interim analyses conducted every 13 weeks after enrollment of 300 participants, with changes in allocation tables determined by the best performing dose.
Salchow, 2020 ⁶⁹	To apply need-based interventions to prevent long-term effects of treatment and disease in young cancer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Annual comprehensive assessment to determine the need for preventive intervention (or no need for intervention) followed by need-stratified modular

Author, year ^[ref]	Study objective	Adaptive or pragmatic components
	survivors followed in survivorship clinics.	interventions (physical activity, nutrition, psycho-oncology).
Downs, 2018 ⁷⁰	Individually tailored intervention for managing weight in pregnant women with overweight or obesity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adaptation of intervention approaches (i.e., increased dose intensity) based on gestational weight every 3-4 weeks.
<i>Pragmatic trials</i>		
Wattar, 2019 ⁷¹	To evaluate the effects of a Mediterranean-style diet and dietary advice compared with routine antenatal care on maternal and offspring outcomes in pregnant women with metabolic risk factors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At the trial design stage, pregnant women were consulted about the feasibility and acceptability of the planned trial. • Patients were recruited from five maternity units at their first antenatal booking appointment. • Broad eligibility criteria. • Baseline information for screening purposes was collected from medical records. • Co-primary outcomes were determined using a Delphi survey; those considered to be critically important in the care of pregnant women were chosen.

Author, year ^[ref]	Study objective	Adaptive or pragmatic components
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outcome data was collected from clinical notes and hospital electronic records.
Schuetz, 2019 ²⁸	To test the hypothesis that protocol-guided individualized nutrition support to reach protein and caloric goals reduces the risk of adverse clinical outcomes in medical inpatients at nutritional risk.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patients recruited from eight secondary and tertiary care hospitals. • Broad eligibility criteria. • Malnutrition screening conducted routinely in all sites was used to screen patients for inclusion in the trial. • Intervention was delivered during hospital stay by trained dietitians; control group received standard hospital food. • Outcomes relevant to patients; outcome assessors blinded to trial assignment.
Fortin, 2021 ⁷²	To evaluate the effectiveness of a 4-month interdisciplinary intervention based on change in care delivery for patients with multimorbidity treated in primary care practices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patients recruited from 7 family medicine groups; primary care clinicians referred patients. • Broad eligibility criteria. • Trained members of the primary care teams (including dietitians) delivered the intervention. • Delayed intervention in the control group.

Author, year ^[ref]	Study objective	Adaptive or pragmatic components
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outcomes relevant to patients and care providers.
Colin-Ramirez, 2018 ⁷³	To evaluate the long-term effects of a low sodium diet compared to standard care on all-cause mortality composite outcome in patients with chronic heart failure.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patients recruited from ambulatory centers in 6 countries to ensure generalizability of findings. • Isocaloric diet, low sodium diet plan prescribed by a dietitian; sample menus adapted to each study region; control group received standard care (nonspecific advice to limit dietary sodium). • Intervention was delivered for 12 months, and patients were followed up to 24 months. • Food records to estimate sodium intake. • Study visits embedded within a clinical visit for routine medical and physical examination.