

NIHR Carbon Guidelines - FAQs

1. Why do the guidelines address only the principles of good research?

The guidelines outline strategies to reduce the carbon emissions from health research. Because most publicly funded health research is conducted in NHS hospitals and universities, general institutional strategies to reduce carbon emissions would also reduce the carbon emissions from health research. However, strategies to reduce carbon emissions from buildings and from travel to work have been outlined in previous guidance and are not considered here. The focus of the guidelines is on how methodological and practical aspects of health research impact on the associated carbon footprint.

2. How much carbon can be cut using these guidelines?

This is difficult to estimate because each study would need to be considered on a case by case basis. However, the guidelines use case studies to illustrate the potential savings that can be made by applying the principles outlined in the document; poor publication practice for example can have serious environmental consequences. Chalmers & Glasziou estimate that every year, at least 12,000 trials are completed but remain unpublished. Using the recently published figure for the average CO₂ emissions per clinical trial of 78.4 tons, they estimate that just under a million tons of carbon dioxide is wasted every year (12,000 x 78.4 = 940,800) in conducting clinical trials that do not contribute to the scientific knowledge base. This is equivalent to the carbon emissions from about 800,000 round trip flights between London and New York.

3. How will the NIHR monitor the impact of these guidelines?

In the interests of keeping paperwork to a minimum, the NIHR will not be introducing any additional monitoring steps at this stage. Researchers will however be asked to confirm that they have considered the carbon cost of their research during the application process.

4. How and when will the guidelines be revised?

The guidelines will be reviewed every three years by a working group and revised if necessary.

5. What other steps is the Department of Health taking to reduce the carbon footprint of research?

The Department of Health is currently looking at funding for research into healthcare sustainability.

6. What impact will the guidelines have on the grant application process?

Researchers applying for NIHR funding will be asked to consider the carbon footprint of their research and take steps to reduce carbon emissions where appropriate. There will be a question on the standard NIHR application form asking researchers to confirm that they have read the guidelines and where possible taken steps to reduce the carbon emissions generated from their research. Funding boards will not be considering the carbon footprint of studies directly in their decision making at this stage, however the principles of good carbon management are compatible with good study design and therefore should not generate conflict.