

Word for Word

Risk Factor vs. Cause

Can the terms *risk factor* and *cause* be used interchangeably? Well, sometimes.

As defined in *Dorland's Illustrated Medical Dictionary*, a cause is anything that “brings about any condition or produces any effect.”

Examples:

Viruses, bacteria, and fungi are all known to cause diseases.

Cancer can be caused by genetic, environmental, and/or immunological factors.

Her slip on the icy surface caused her to fall and break her hip.

In contrast with the definition of *cause*, *Dorland's* says that a risk factor is “a clearly defined occurrence or characteristic that has been associated with the increased rate of a subsequently occurring disease.” This shows that a risk factor's relationship to a disease is less direct than that of a cause.

Examples:

Obesity is a risk factor for gynecological cancers.

Atherosclerosis is a risk factor for primary hypertension.

Exposure to secondhand smoke is a risk factor for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

However, *Dorland's* also adds this qualifying statement in the definition of *risk factor*: “causality may or may not be implied.” Because a risk factor may both cause a disease and be associated with an increased incidence of it, the term *risk factor* is more widely applicable than *cause*.

Reference

1. *Dorland's Illustrated Medical Dictionary*, 29th edition. Philadelphia, PA: W.B. Saunders Co.; 2000.

--Don Norwood