Word for Word

Cohort and population

The words *cohort* and *population* can sometimes be used interchangeably, but their precise meanings differ.

In common practice, both of these words are used to describe a group of patients.

**Examples:**

The mean age of the study cohort was 55.8 years.

The mean age of the study population was 55.8 years.

However, the words have distinct meanings that make one or the other more suitable in certain contexts.

A *cohort* is “a group of individuals who share a common exposure, experience, or characteristic, or a group of individuals followed up or traced over time.”¹ A *cohort study* examines a defined group of people (the *cohort*) over time to determine whether different characteristics or interventions are associated with different outcomes.²

**Example:**

There were two dose cohorts (1.5 mg/kg and 2.1 mg/kg). The drug was well tolerated in both cohorts.

The word *population* has a broader sense: “the total of individuals occupying an area or making up a whole”³ or “any finite or infinite collection of individuals from which a sample is drawn for a study to obtain estimates to approximate..."
the values that would be obtained if the entire population were sampled."\(^1\)

**Examples:**

"The prevalence of chronic pain in cancer survivors is double that of the general U.S. population."\(^4\)

"Cancer incidence during childhood ... is approximately 10% higher in males than in females (18.2 vs 16.4 per 100,000 population)."\(^5\)

No studies have examined this trend in the adolescent and young adult (AYA) population. We therefore retrospectively evaluated data for AYA patients seen at our institution from January 2004 to December 2019.

The more precise meanings of these two words are illustrated in the term *population-based cohort study*. From a *population* in a large public health database, a *cohort* of individuals with specific characteristics can be selected.

**References**


--Sunita Patterson

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