Evidence Pyramid - Levels of Evidence

**Level 1 Evidence**
- **Systematic Review or Meta-Analysis of Randomized Controlled Trials**: See box below for more information about systematic reviews and meta-analysis.
- **Clinical Practice Guidelines**: Systematically developed statements to assist clinicians and patients in making decisions about care; ideally the guidelines consist of a systematic review of the literature, in conjunction with consensus of a group of expert decision-makers, including administrators, policy makers, clinicians, and consumers who consider the evidence and make recommendations.

**Level 2 Evidence**
- **Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT)**: A true experiment (i.e., one that delivers an intervention or treatment in which subjects are randomly assigned to control and experimental groups); the strongest design to support cause and effect relationships.

**Level 3 Evidence**
- **Controlled Trial**: experimental design that studies the effect of an intervention or treatment using at least two groups: one that received the intervention and one that did not; participants are **NOT randomly assigned** to a group.

**Level 4 Evidence**
- **Cohort Study**: A longitudinal study that begins with the gathering of two groups of patients (the cohorts), one that received the exposure (e.g., to a disease) and one that does not, and then following these groups over time (prospective) to measure the development of different outcomes (diseases).
- **Case-Control Study**: A type of research that retrospectively compares characteristics of an individual who has a certain condition (e.g. hypertension) with one who does not (i.e., a matched control or similar person without hypertension); often conducted for the purpose of identifying variables that might predict the condition (e.g., stressful lifestyle, sodium intake).

**Level 5 Evidence**
- **Systematic Review of Descriptive and Qualitative Studies**: See box to the left for more information about systematic reviews.

**Level 6 Evidence**
- **Single descriptive or qualitative study**
  - **Qualitative research**: method that systematically examines a phenomenon using an inductive approach & exploration of meaning of phenomenon; purpose is to understand & describe human experience, explore meanings & patterns; data are often narrative.

**Level 7 Evidence**
- **Expert opinion**: Recommendations from persons with established expertise in a specific clinical area often based on clinical experience; not considered a research method because systematic (or critical) inquiry is lacking.