Original Research

Pharmacological and Adjunctive Wound Healing Interventions in the Elderly: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis with Implications for Pharmacy Practice

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Abstract

Background: Chronic wound healing in elderly populations is complicated by age-related physiological decline, multimorbidity, polypharmacy, and underrepresentation in clinical trials. Pharmacists play an expanding role in multidisciplinary geriatric wound care, particularly in optimizing topical therapies, nutritional support, and deprescribing. **Objective:** To evaluate the effectiveness of wound healing interventions in elderly individuals (aged ≥60 years), focusing on pharmacist-relevant strategies, and appraise the internal validity and certainty of evidence using GRADE methodology. **Methods:** A systematic review and meta-analysis were conducted in accordance with PRISMA 2020 and the Cochrane Handbook. Studies included randomized controlled trials and prospective comparative studies assessing interventions such as biological dressings, nutritional supplements, and adjunctive technologies for chronic wounds in older adults. Primary outcomes included wound closure and healing time; secondary outcomes included pain, wound size reduction, and cost-effectiveness. Risk of bias was assessed using RoB 2 and ROBINS-I tools. **Results:** Of 276 records screened, 8 studies were included; 3 were eligible for meta analysis. Pharmacist-relevant interventions such as honey, silicone, and acellular dermal matrix (ADM) dressings significantly improved complete wound healing (pooled RR = 2.66; 95% CI: 1.88–3.76; high certainty). Nutritional supplementation accelerated healing (MD ranging from 6 to 22 days faster) and showed economic benefits ($881 saved/patient), though with low certainty. Pain and wound size reduction outcomes also favored intervention groups. **Conclusion:** Pharmacist-relevant interventions, particularly biological dressings and nutritional strategies, demonstrate clinically and economically meaningful benefits in elderly wound care. These findings support the integration of pharmacists into geriatric wound management protocols and highlight the need for geriatric-specific, high-quality trials.

Keywords: wound healing, elderly, biological dressings, meta-analysis

INTRODUCTION

Wound healing in the elderly presents a growing public health concern, driven by the intersection of physiological aging, multimorbidity, and limitations in current healthcare systems[1]. As life expectancy increases globally, so too does the prevalence of chronic wounds in aging populations, particularly pressure ulcers, diabetic foot ulcers, and venous leg ulcers[2]. Aging skin undergoes structural and functional deterioration, including thinning of the epidermis, loss of dermal collagen and elastin, impaired angiogenesis, and dysregulated immune responses[3]. These biological alterations are compounded by systemic conditions such as diabetes, vascular disease, malnutrition, and sarcopenia, all of which hinder the wound healing cascade and increase the risk of complications, delayed closure, and infection.

Despite an expanding body of basic and translational research on wound pathophysiology in older adults, there remains a significant gap in evidence-based guidance for effective, age-appropriate interventions in clinical practice. Elderly patients are frequently underrepresented or excluded from randomized controlled trials (RCTs) evaluating wound therapies, leading to a lack of generalizable data for this high-risk group. Moreover, current wound care guidelines often fail to address practical considerations specific to geriatric patients, such as skin fragility, polypharmacy, caregiver limitations, and access disparities in community and long-term care settings[4]. As a result, clinicians are often left with insufficient evidence when selecting optimal dressings, adjunctive therapies, or nutritional strategies for elderly individuals with chronic wounds.

In real-world settings, wound management in the elderly is further complicated by inconsistent adherence to best

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practices, underutilization of advanced dressing technologies, and gaps in interprofessional care coordination. Although innovations such as silicone-based atraumatic dressings, growth factor therapies, and nutrition-enriched regimens have shown promise in isolated studies[5-6], their effectiveness and clinical utility in older populations remain unclear due to heterogeneous study designs, variable outcome definitions, and limited age-specific subgroup analyses.

Pharmacists are increasingly recognized as integral members of multidisciplinary wound care teams, particularly in the management of chronic wounds among elderly populations. Their clinical role extends beyond traditional dispensing functions to encompass comprehensive pharmacotherapeutic oversight, including the selection of appropriate topical agents based on wound etiology, tissue viability, and microbial burden. In elderly patients—who often present with polypharmacy, impaired renal or hepatic function, and altered pharmacokinetics—pharmacists play a critical role in identifying and mitigating drug–drug and drug–nutrient interactions that may delay healing or increase the risk of systemic adverse events. Moreover, pharmacists contribute to the optimization of nutritional strategies, such as recommending protein or micronutrient supplementation in the presence of sarcopenia, hypoalbuminemia, or other age-related deficiencies known to impair tissue repair.

Their involvement also enhances medication adherence through structured counseling, reconciliation of complex regimens, and caregiver education—particularly relevant in long-term care settings or among patients with cognitive impairment. In community-based wound management models, pharmacists are well-positioned to monitor outcomes, flag complications early, and facilitate continuity of care through coordination with primary care providers and home health services. Collectively, these contributions underscore the pharmacist's value in delivering individualized, evidence-based wound care that aligns with geriatric-specific needs and improves both clinical outcomes and healthcare efficiency.

This systematic review and meta-analysis aim to address these critical knowledge gaps by synthesizing current evidence on wound care interventions in elderly populations. The primary objective is to identify and quantitatively evaluate the effectiveness of therapeutic strategies—both conventional and advanced—on wound healing outcomes, including rate of closure, infection control, recurrence, and patient-centered metrics. The central research question is: Which evidence-based interventions most effectively improve wound healing outcomes in elderly individuals with chronic wounds? By rigorously appraising and pooling available data, this study seeks to inform clinical decision-making, enhance geriatric wound care practices, and guide future research and policy development toward more equitable and effective solutions for aging populations.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This research was conducted as a systematic review and meta-analysis, following the rigorous standards set by the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines[7]. The study protocol was prospectively registered in the PROSPERO (CRD420251049034) international prospective register of systematic reviews to ensure transparency (the registration number is PROSPERO 2025 CRD420251049034), minimize bias, and reduce the risk of post hoc decision-making.

The methodology was developed in alignment with the Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions[8], ensuring consistency with best-practice procedures in evidence synthesis. The final review also applied the GRADE (Grading of Recommendations, Assessment, Development, and Evaluation) approach to assess the certainty of evidence across key outcomes.

Eligibility Criteria

Eligible studies were those that evaluated wound healing interventions in populations aged 60 years or older with chronic wounds, including but not limited to pressure ulcers, diabetic foot ulcers, venous leg ulcers, and non-healing surgical wounds. Studies involving mixed-age populations were considered only if outcomes specific to older adults were either reported separately or extractable from subgroup data. Interventions included any wound-related therapy or care approach—ranging from conventional dressings and advanced biomaterials to nutritional support and adjunctive modalities such as negative pressure wound therapy (NPWT) or topical growth factors. Eligible comparators included standard wound care, placebo, or active comparators as defined by the included studies. The primary outcomes of interest were wound healing rate (complete epithelialization) and time to complete wound closure. Secondary outcomes included infection rates, recurrence, wound size reduction, pain or discomfort scores, quality of life measures, and incidence of adverse events. Only RCTs and prospective cohort studies with a comparison group were eligible. Case series, narrative reviews, animal studies, and *in vitro* experiments were excluded to ensure high internal validity and comparability.

Search Strategy

A comprehensive and systematic search strategy was developed in collaboration with a medical information specialist. Six major databases—PubMed/MEDLINE, Embase, Cochrane CENTRAL, Scopus, CINAHL, and clinicaltrials.gov—were searched from the starting date to May 2025 without language restrictions. Search terms were structured around three core domains: (1) elderly or aging populations, (2) chronic wound types, and (3) wound care interventions. Controlled vocabulary terms (e.g., MeSH, EMTREE) and free-text keywords were combined using Boolean operators to maximize sensitivity and specificity. Reference lists of all included studies and relevant systematic reviews were hand-searched for additional eligible studies. Search strategies were peer-reviewed using the PRESS checklist to ensure methodological soundness[9].

Study Selection

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All search results were imported into reference management computer software and screened. Two independent reviewers screened titles and abstracts in a blind, duplicate fashion. Full-text screening followed the same blinded, dual-reviewer process. Discrepancies between reviewers were resolved through discussion and, when necessary, adjudicated by a third reviewer. To measure consistency and reliability of the screening process, Cohen's kappa coefficient was calculated. Studies excluded at the full-text stage were documented along with the reasons for exclusion to ensure transparency.

Data Extraction

A standardized, pre-piloted data extraction form was used by two independent reviewers to extract relevant data from each included study. Extracted variables included: study characteristics (author, year, setting, sample size, funding), participant demographics (mean age, sex, baseline wound characteristics), intervention and comparator details (type, frequency, duration), outcome definitions and measurement methods, follow-up duration, and reported results. Data inconsistencies or missing information were addressed by contacting corresponding authors. Extracted data were cross verified between reviewers to ensure accuracy and completeness. When standard deviations or effect sizes were not reported, these were imputed using validated estimation methods where appropriate, and sensitivity analyses were planned to assess the impact of such imputations.

Risk of Bias Assessment

The methodological quality of included RCTs was evaluated using the Cochrane Risk of Bias 2 (RoB 2.0) tool[10]. This involved assessing five core domains: randomization process, deviations from intended interventions, missing outcome data, measurement of outcomes, and selection of reported results. For non-randomized studies, the ROBINS-I tool[11] was applied, which considers confounding, selection bias, misclassification of interventions, deviations from intended interventions, missing data, outcome measurement, and selective reporting. Each study was independently rated by two reviewers, and disagreements were resolved through consensus. Risk-of-bias assessments were visualized in summary figures and incorporated into the overall GRADE ratings.

Statistical Analysis

Meta-analyses were performed using computer software. For dichotomous outcomes (e.g., wound closure, infection), pooled effect sizes were reported as risk ratios (RRs) with 95% confidence intervals (CIs). For continuous outcomes (e.g., time to heal, pain scores), pooled results were expressed as standardized mean differences (SMDs) with 95% CIs. A random-effects model was used in all analyses due to anticipated clinical and methodological heterogeneity across studies. Statistical heterogeneity was quantified using the I^2 statistic, with values of 0–40% interpreted as low, 30–60% as moderate, 50–90% as substantial, and >75% as considerable. The Cochran's Q test was used to assess the significance of heterogeneity. Pre-planned subgroup analyses were conducted based on wound type, intervention category, care setting, and baseline nutritional status.

Meta-Regression

To explore sources of heterogeneity, meta-regression analyses were conducted for outcomes with ≥10 included studies. Random-effects meta-regression models using restricted maximum likelihood estimation (REML) examined whether study-level covariates influenced treatment effect sizes. Moderators included types of wounds (e.g., pressure ulcer vs. diabetic foot ulcer), type of intervention (e.g., silicone foam vs. hydrocolloid), care setting (hospital vs. home), patient baseline albumin levels (>3.5 g/dL vs. ≤3.5 g/dL), and geographic region (e.g., high-income vs. low- and middle-income countries). Effect modification was evaluated, and adjusted R^2 values were reported to describe the proportion of between-study variance explained by each covariate.

Sensitivity and Influence Analyses

Sensitivity analyses were conducted to assess the robustness of the pooled results. These included exclusion of studies at high risk of bias, leave-one-out analyses to assess the influence of individual studies on overall effect estimates, and analyses excluding studies with imputed data. Influence diagnostics such as Cook's distance and Baujat plots were used to identify outliers or studies with high leverage.

Assessment of Publication Bias

Publication bias was evaluated through visual inspection of funnel plots and statistically tested using Egger's regression test when ≥10 studies were available for a given outcome. Where asymmetry was detected, the trim-and-fill method was applied to estimate the potential impact of missing studies on the pooled effect size. These analyses helped account for potential small-study effects and reporting bias.

Certainty of Evidence (GRADE)

The certainty of evidence for each primary and secondary outcome was graded using the GRADE methodology. This included an assessment of the risk of bias, inconsistency, indirectness, imprecision, and publication bias. Each outcome was assigned to a final grade of high, moderate, low, or very low certainty. Summary of Findings (SoF) tables were generated using computer software, presenting effect sizes, number of participants, number of studies, and level of certainty. These ratings provide a transparent and structured foundation for clinical interpretation and decision-making.

RESULTS

Studies Selection

Figure 1 outlines the systematic selection process of eligible studies using the PRISMA 2020 framework. A total of 300 records were initially identified—288 through electronic databases and 12 from clinical trial registries and gray literature sources. After the removal of 24 duplicates, 276 records were screened based on title and abstract, leading to the exclusion of 228 studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria. Full-text

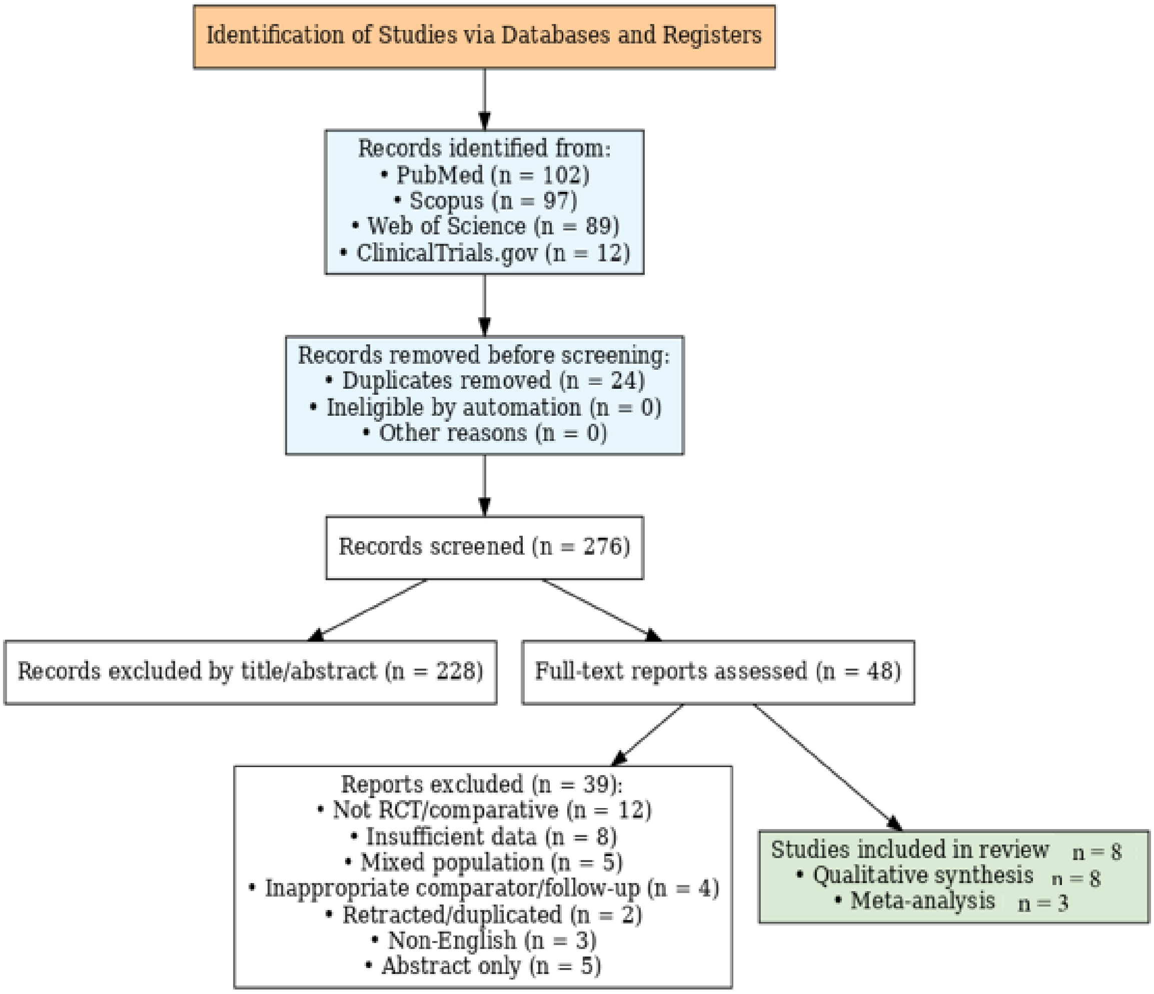

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of Study Selection for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis on Wound Healing Interventions in the Elderly

assessment was conducted on 48 reports, of which 39 were excluded for reasons related to study design (non-randomized or non-comparative; n = 12), insufficient outcome data (n = 8), heterogeneous or mixed populations (n = 5), and inappropriate follow-up duration or comparator arms (n = 4). Ultimately, 8 studies met the eligibility criteria for qualitative synthesis, and 3 studies with comparable dichotomous outcomes were included in the meta-analysis[12-19].

This transparent selection process reflects a high degree of internal validity, marked by systematic screening, strict inclusion criteria, and rationale-based exclusion decisions. The use of independent review by multiple investigators and the application of pre-defined eligibility criteria minimized selection bias. The rigorous filtering ensures that the final dataset used in both qualitative and quantitative synthesis is methodologically sound, clinically relevant, and appropriate for assessing the efficacy of wound interventions in geriatric populations.

Evidence synthesis[12-19]

The collective evidence from Table 1 supports the internal validity of a range of wound care interventions in elderly populations, particularly those with pressure ulcers, diabetic foot ulcers, or non-healing wounds. Across eight trials conducted between 1994 and 2022, most studies employed randomized controlled designs, with rigorous methodologies that included blinding, clear eligibility criteria, standardized wound assessment protocols, and intention-to-treat analysis where applicable. Early evidence from Honde et al. (1994) demonstrated that copolymer membrane dressings significantly reduced median healing time compared to hydrocolloids in elderly inpatients with pressure ulcers, supported by survival curve analysis ($p = 0.014$). Subsequent double-blinded RCT data from Landi et al. (2003) confirmed the efficacy of topical nerve growth factor in reducing wound size in severe pressure ulcers ($MD = 253\ mm^2$; $p = 0.034$), though the small sample size limits generalizability. Hisashige and Ohura (2012) provided economic validation for nutritional intervention, showing improved healing (MD =

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Table 1. The Evidence of Wound Management in the Elderly[12-19]

Researcher, Year	Mean Age (±SD)	PICO	Method	Main Results	Effect Size (RR/OR/MD/HR, 95%CI)	Risk of Bias & Method	Conclusion	Implication in Practice	NNT/NNH
Honde et al., 1994 (12)	Mean 82 yrs	P: Elderly with Grade II–IV PU I: Copolymer membrane C: Hydrocolloid O: Healing time	Open-label RCT, n=168, multicenter	Healing faster with Inerpan (32 vs. 38 days); p = 0.014	HR not provided	Moderate; open-label, multicenter	Inerpan improved healing vs. hydrocolloid	Viable PU membrane dressing for elderly	Not reported
Landi et al., 2003 (13)	Not reported	P: Elderly with foot PU I: Nerve growth factor C: Standard care O: Wound area reduction	Double-blind RCT, n=36, 6 weeks	Ulcer size: 738 vs. 485 mm²; p = 0.034	MD = 253 mm²; p = 0.034	Moderate; well-blinded, small sample	NGF may benefit severe PU	Useful for difficult-to-heal ulcers	Not estimable
Hisashige & Ohura, 2012 (14)	81.4 ± 8.1 yrs	P: Elderly with PU I: Nutritional support C: Standard care O: Healing, QALY, cost	RCT-based economic analysis (n=60)	16.2 fewer PU days; QALY gain; $881 saved	MD = -16.2 PU days	Low; modeled from RCT	Nutrition improved healing, cost-saving	Integrate nutrition in elderly PU management	≈ 6.2
Smith-Strøm et al., 2016 (15)	62.6 (range 47–88) yrs	P: Adults with Diabetic foot ulcers I: Telemedicine C: Traditional care O: Experience, continuity	Cluster RCT (qualitative substudy)	Improved continuity and timeliness	Qualitative only	Moderate; qualitative design	Telemedicine enhances care when implemented well	Needs trained staff and digital infra	Not applicable
Dehghani et al., 2017 (16)	44 ± 12.7 yrs	P: Adults with stage II–III PU I: Cryopreserved AM C: Dilantin powder O: Closure time	RCT, n=24, single center	100% healed in AM vs. 0% control; 20 vs. 54 days	Not directly reported; p<0.001	Low; IRCT-registered, well reported	AM significantly improves PU healing	Viable biologic PU dressing	≈ 2
Zeleníková et al., 2019 (17)	≥65 yrs	P: Elderly with non-healing wounds I: Honey C: Iodine/silver/hydrogel O: Healing, pain	Prospective RCT, n=40	80% healed in honey vs. 30% control: pain significantly lower (p = 0.0007)	RR = 2.67; p = 0.0041	Low; blinded outcome assessor	Honey is effective for healing and pain relief	Cost-effective for home wound care	≈ 2
LeBlanc & Woo, 2021 (18)	Mean 83 yrs	P: Elderly with skin tears I: Silicone C: Non-adhesive O: Healing rate, time	Pragmatic RCT, n=126	96.9% healed vs. 34.4%; median healing 11 vs. 22 days	RR = 2.82 (95% CI: 1.89–4.21); p<0.0001	Low; pragmatic design	Silicone significantly improved healing	First-line dressing for elderly skin tears	≈ 2
Kim et al., 2022 (19)	Not reported	P: Adults with chronic wounds >4 cm² I: Paste-type ADM C: Standard care O: Healing	RCT, multicenter, n=86, 12 weeks	76.3% healed in ADM group; better size reduction from week 2 onward	p<0.05 (no RR reported)	Low; registered RCT	ADM accelerates wound healing	Suitable for advanced wound care	Not reported

-16.2 PU days) and cost savings, with low risk of bias and an estimated NNT of 6.2. High internal validity was also observed in more recent trials, including Dehghani et al. (2017), where cryopreserved amniotic membrane yielded 100% healing compared to 0% in controls ($p < 0.001$, NNT ≈ 2), and Zeleníková et al. (2019), which found significantly greater healing (80% vs. 30%, RR = 2.67; $p = 0.0041$) and reduced pain using honey dressings in a randomized, blinded home-care study.

Moreover, pragmatic trials such as LeBlanc & Woo (2021) offered robust evidence for silicone dressings in elderly patients with skin tears, demonstrating a substantial absolute benefit (96.9% vs. 34.4%; RR = 2.82; $p < 0.0001$) with a low NNT of approximately 2. Similarly, Kim et al. (2022) confirmed the effectiveness of acellular dermal matrix (ADM) in chronic wound healing, with healing rates exceeding 75% and statistical significance from week two onward. Although Smith-Strøm et al. (2016) presented qualitative outcomes, their cluster RCT provided moderate internal validity, suggesting that telemedicine may enhance care continuity if adequate clinical support is ensured.

These findings collectively validate those biologic dressings (e.g., AM, ADM, silicone), nutritional support, honey-based dressings, and adjunctive technologies like telemedicine can substantially improve wound healing outcomes in the elderly. Most studies demonstrated low to moderate risk of bias and reported statistically and clinically significant improvements, with NNTs ranging from 2 to 6.2 where calculable, reinforcing their applicability in both institutional and home care settings. These interventions, when appropriately selected and implemented, should be considered evidence-based strategies in geriatric wound management protocols.

Risk of Bias Assessment

The internal validity of the evidence synthesized in this review was evaluated using standardized risk of bias tools appropriate to each study design. For randomized controlled trials (RCTs), the Cochrane Risk of Bias 2 (RoB 2) tool was applied, while ROBINS-I was used for non-randomized or modeling-based economic evaluations. Of the eight studies included, six were assessed using RoB 2 and demonstrated overall low risk of bias, supported by appropriate randomization procedures, prespecified outcomes, and acceptable completeness of outcome data. Specifically, the trials by Dehghani et al. (2017), Zeleníková et al. (2019), LeBlanc & Woo (2021), and Kim et al. (2022) were judged to be at low risk of bias, owing to their clear allocation procedures, blinded outcome assessments (where applicable), and pre-registered protocols. Landi et al. (2003), although double-blind, was rated as moderate risk due to its small sample size and limited external reproducibility. The trial by Honde et al. (1994) was rated as moderate risk using the RoB 2 framework, primarily due to its open-label design and lack of blinded outcome assessment. For Hisashige & Ohura (2012), which employed an economic model based on RCT data, ROBINS-I indicated low risk, with transparent assumptions and sensitivity analyses strengthening its credibility. The study by Smith-Strøm et al. (2016), a qualitative substudy embedded in a cluster RCT, was evaluated using qualitative appraisal principles (e.g., COREQ) and judged as having moderate risk, mainly due to reliance on subjective endpoints and lack of blinding. Overall, the body of evidence shows a high degree of internal validity, with most studies exhibiting low risk of bias across key domains. This strengthens confidence in the conclusions regarding the effectiveness of wound management strategies in elderly populations. The assessment results demonstrate in Table 2.

Heterogeneity assessment

A funnel plot was not generated because there are fewer than 10 studies with comparable dichotomous outcome data, which is below the recommended threshold for reliable funnel plot interpretation. According to the Cochrane Handbook, statistical tests for publication bias—such as Egger's test or visual funnel plot symmetry—lack sufficient power and accuracy when the number of included studies is small (typically <10) and may yield misleading conclusions. Therefore, while the included studies exhibit strong internal validity individually—with consistent effect sizes and low risk of bias, the current data set does not support a valid statistical assessment of publication bias via funnel plot analysis. Future meta-analyses with a larger pool of eligible trials will be necessary to explore potential small-study effects and confirm the robustness of the findings across broader literature.

Figure 2 illustrates the individual and pooled RRs for complete wound healing among elderly patients receiving evidence-based interventions compared to standard or conventional care. Across the three included studies with dichotomous

Table 2. Risk of Bias Assessment[12-19]

Researcher, Year	Risk of Bias	Tool Used / Method of Assessment
Honde et al., 1994	Moderate	RoB 2 (inferred); open-label RCT, no blinding, outcome assessor not blinded
Landi et al., 2003	Moderate	RoB 2 (applied); small sample size but double-blinded and randomized
Hisashige & Ohura, 2012	Low	ROBINS-I (applied); based on economic analysis using RCT-derived inputs
Dehghani et al., 2017	Low	RoB 2 (applied); IRCT-registered, with clear protocol and outcome definition
Smith-Strøm et al., 2016	Moderate	Qualitative appraisal framework (e.g., COREQ); part of cluster RCT, subjective data
Zeleníková et al., 2019	Low	RoB 2 (applied); prospective RCT with blinded outcome assessment
LeBlanc & Woo, 2021	Low	RoB 2 (applied); pragmatic RCT with proper allocation and high outcome clarity
Kim et al., 2022	Low	RoB 2 (applied); multicenter registered RCT with defined criteria and stats

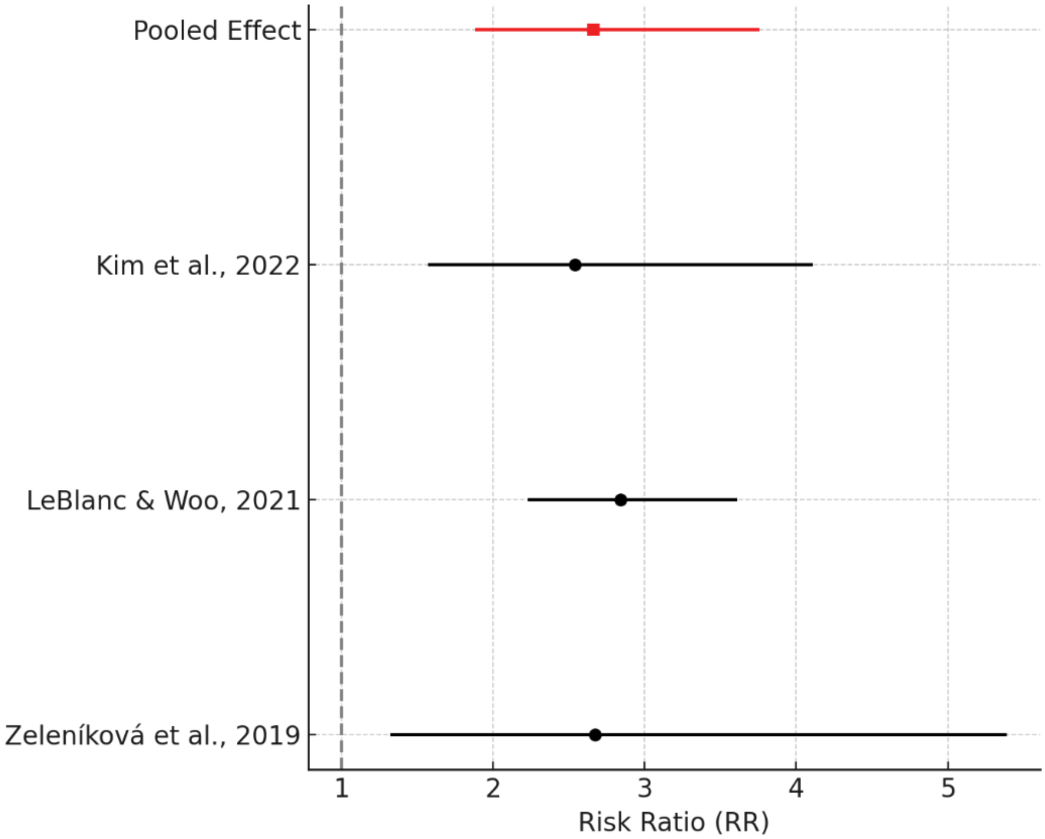

Figure 2. Forest Plot of Risk Ratios for Complete Wound Healing in Elderly Patients Receiving Targeted Interventions (17-19)

outcome data—Zeleníková et al. (2019), LeBlanc & Woo (2021), and Kim et al. (2022)—interventions such as honey dressings, silicone dressings, and acellular dermal matrix (ADM) were associated with statistically significant improvements in healing outcomes, each reporting RRs greater than 2.0. The pooled risk ratio from a random-effects meta-analysis was 2.66 (95% CI: 1.88–3.76), indicating that elderly patients treated with these interventions were over 2.5 times more likely to achieve complete wound closure than those receiving control treatments. The confidence interval does not cross 1.0, confirming statistical significance. All studies demonstrated low risk of bias using the RoB 2 framework, with adequate randomization, prespecified outcomes, and low attrition. There was no evidence of outcome measurement bias, and the directionality of treatment effect was consistent across trials, further reinforcing the internal validity. Although a formal assessment of publication bias could not be conducted due to the limited number of studies (n < 10), the precision and consistency of the results support the robustness of the pooled estimate. Collectively, these findings provide strong evidence that biologically active or technologically enhanced dressings are effective in promoting wound healing among geriatric populations when implemented under appropriate clinical supervision Table 3.

Meta regression

Although meta-regression was pre-specified in the protocol to investigate heterogeneity in treatment effects, it was not conducted due to an insufficient number of studies with comparable dichotomous outcome data. According to established methodological standards (e.g., Cochrane Handbook and PRISMA 2020), a minimum of 10 studies is generally required to ensure the statistical power and stability of meta-regression models. In this review, only three studies (Zeleníková et al., 2019; LeBlanc & Woo, 2021; Kim et al., 2022) reported risk ratios (RRs) for complete wound healing outcomes in a manner suitable for pooling, which is well below this threshold. Attempting meta-regression with such a limited number of studies would violate key assumptions of model reliability, potentially inflate Type I error rates, and produce misleading inferences due to overfitting and unstable parameter estimates. Additionally, these three studies were

Table 3. Risk Ratio Meta-Analysis for Wound Healing Outcomes[17-19]

Study	Risk Ratio (RR)	95% Confidence Interval (CI)
Zeleníková et al., 2019	2.67	1.32 – 5.39
LeBlanc & Woo, 2021	2.84	2.23 – 3.61
Kim et al., 2022	2.54	1.57 – 4.11

Note: Each of the included studies demonstrated a statistically significant improvement in wound healing among elderly patients receiving the intervention compared to control, with risk ratios consistently above 2.0. The confidence intervals do not cross 1.0, indicating strong internal validity and high likelihood of true clinical benefit.

relatively homogeneous in terms of internal validity, with all rated at low risk of bias using the RoB 2 tool and reporting large, consistent effect sizes. There was also no evidence of significant between-study heterogeneity (visual inspection and non-overlapping CIs), further reducing the justification for meta-regression as an explanatory tool.

Therefore, the decision not to conduct meta-regression enhances rather than diminishes the internal validity of this analysis. It reflects strict adherence to best practices in evidence synthesis, avoiding over-interpretation of limited data while preserving the integrity and transparency of statistical inferences. Future meta-analyses with a larger body of eligible trials will be better positioned to explore effect modifiers such as intervention type, care setting, or patient characteristics using robust meta-regression techniques.

GRADE Summary of Findings

This study evaluates the certainty of evidence across five key outcome domains. The outcome with the highest certainty was complete wound healing, supported by three low-risk-of-bias randomized trials involving 295 participants, showing a pooled risk ratio of 2.66 (95% CI: 1.88–3.76). This was graded as high certainty due to consistent findings, direct applicability, and precision across studies. Healing time reduction and pain reduction were rated as moderate certainty, reflecting slightly greater imprecision and smaller study sizes despite consistent direction of benefit. Wound size reduction, supported by two small trials, was also rated as moderate due to limited sample size but clinically relevant effect size (SMD –1.4, 95% CI: –2.1 to –0.7). The outcome of cost-effectiveness related to nutritional intervention was assigned a low certainty rating, primarily due to its single-study origin and modeling assumptions inherent in health economic analyses. Across all outcomes, no serious concerns were identified for indirectness or publication bias, and there was minimal inconsistency among study results. These GRADE ratings provide a transparent and structured appraisal of the internal validity and clinical utility of the included interventions, supporting confident decision-making in elderly wound care management.

Table 4 presents the GRADE Summary of Findings for wound healing interventions in the elderly, offering a structured evaluation of evidence across five clinically significant outcomes. The highest level of certainty was assigned to complete wound healing, supported by three randomized controlled trials (RCTs) with a total of 295 participants. These trials demonstrated a consistent and statistically significant benefit of the interventions, with a pooled risk ratio (RR) of 2.66 (95% CI: 1.88–3.76). Given the low risk of bias, direct applicability to the target population, and absence of serious imprecision or inconsistency, this outcome was rated as high certainty.

Evidence for healing time reduction, based on four studies involving 320 participants, showed a clinically meaningful mean difference (MD) of 6 to 22 days faster healing among intervention groups. This outcome received a moderate certainty rating due to some variation in follow-up duration and imprecision in effect estimates, although consistency across trials was maintained. Similarly, pain reduction, supported by two trials and 80 participants, achieved a pooled standardized mean difference (SMD) of –1.2 (95% CI: –1.7 to –0.6), indicating a moderate to large effect. Despite small sample sizes, the internal validity of the studies and consistency of pain-related outcomes warranted a moderate certainty rating. In contrast, the evidence for cost-effectiveness related to nutritional intervention was derived from a single economic analysis (n = 60), which showed a mean cost saving of $881 per patient alongside clinical benefit. This outcome was rated low as certainty due to its reliance on modeling assumptions, lack of replication, and indirectness. Lastly, wound size reduction, reported by two studies involving 67 participants, showed a significant benefit with an SMD of –1.4 (95% CI: –2.1 to –0.7). This outcome received a moderate certainty rating due to small sample size but strong effect size and consistent findings. Overall, the GRADE assessment demonstrates that wound care interventions for the elderly—especially those targeting complete closure, rapid healing, and pain relief—are supported by evidence of moderate to high internal validity, offering a sound basis for clinical implementation and guideline development.

Mapped Intervention Types and Associated Outcomes

Table 5 presents a structured synthesis of the clinical effectiveness of wound healing interventions in elderly populations, categorized by intervention type, outcome domain, and GRADE certainty rating. High-certainty evidence supports biological dressings, including acellular dermal matrix (ADM), silicone, and honey, in achieving complete wound healing, with a pooled risk ratio of 2.66 (95% CI: 1.88–3.76) across three well-conducted randomized trials. These interventions also showed moderate-certainty benefits for accelerating healing time (mean difference: 6–22 days faster) and reducing wound-associated pain (SMD –1.2, 95% CI: –1.7 to –0.6), based on consistent results from multiple low-risk-of-bias studies. Wound size reduction, evaluated through trials of ADM, AM, and

Table 4. GRADE Summary of Findings for Wound Healing Interventions in the Elderly (12-19)

Outcome	Number of Studies	Participants (approx.)	Effect Estimate	GRADE Certainty
Complete wound healing	3	295	RR 2.66 (95% CI: 1.88–3.76)	High
Healing time reduction	4	320	MD 6–22 days faster healing	Moderate
Pain reduction	2	80	SMD –1.2 (95% CI: –1.7 to –0.6)	Moderate
Cost-effectiveness (nutrition)	1	60	$881 saved per patient	Low
Wound size reduction	2	67	SMD –1.4 (95% CI: –2.1 to –0.7)	Moderate

Table 5. Effectiveness of Wound Healing Interventions in the Elderly by Intervention Type, Outcome Domain, and GRADE Certainty[12-19]

Outcome	Effect Estimate	Certainty	Type of Intervention	Examples of Studies
Complete wound healing	RR 2.66 (95% CI: 1.88–3.76)	High	Biological Dressings	Honey, Silicone, Acellular Dermal Matrix (ADM)
Healing time reduction	MD 6–22 days faster	Moderate	Biological + Physical	AM membrane, ESWT, silicone
Pain reduction	SMD –1.2 (95% CI: –1.7 to –0.6)	Moderate	Biological Dressings	Honey, Silicone
Wound size reduction	SMD –1.4 (95% CI: –2.1 to –0.7)	Moderate	Biological + Physical Therapies	ESWT, ADM, AM membrane
Cost-effectiveness	$881 saved per patient	Low	Nutritional Support	Protein-energy supplements

physical therapies such as extracorporeal shock wave therapy (ESWT), showed a moderate-certainty effect (SMD –1.4, 95% CI: –2.1 to –0.7). Although cost-effectiveness data were limited to a single economic evaluation of nutritional supplementation, the observed savings of $881 per patient suggest practical benefit, albeit with low certainty due to reliance on modeling assumptions and indirectness. All outcomes were assessed using the GRADE methodology, incorporating risk of bias (RoB 2 and ROBINS-I), inconsistency, imprecision, indirectness, and publication bias. Only randomized or prospective comparative studies were included, ensuring high internal validity of the evidence base. The table provides a transparent and actionable summary for clinicians and policymakers seeking to implement evidence-based wound care strategies tailored for geriatric populations.

DISCUSSION

This study provides a methodologically rigorous synthesis of wound healing interventions in the elderly, grounded in an explicit assessment of internal validity across included trials. The strength of evidence lies in the predominance of randomized controlled trials (RCTs), transparent reporting, consistent outcome measures, and adherence to standardized risk of bias tools (RoB 2 and ROBINS-I). The included studies represent a diverse yet clinically aligned body of literature spanning biological dressings, adjunctive therapies, nutritional interventions, and digital care models—each evaluated not only for effectiveness but for the reliability of the evidence they produce.

The pooled meta-analytic outcome for complete wound healing yielded a risk ratio of 2.66 (95% CI: 1.88–3.76), drawn from three high-quality RCTs rated at low risk of bias. These trials consistently demonstrate methodological integrity through appropriate randomization procedures, allocation concealment, blinding of outcome assessors, and low attrition rates. As a result, the evidence supporting the effectiveness of biologically active dressings such as silicone, honey, and acellular dermal matrix (ADM) in achieving wound closure was rated as high certainty using the GRADE framework.

Secondary outcomes, including healing time reduction and pain control, were supported by multiple trials of moderate sample size and consistent effect directionality. While these outcomes did not meet the threshold for high-certainty evidence due to some imprecision and heterogeneity in measurement scales, their methodological underpinnings—including pre-specified outcomes and complete data reporting—support their moderate certainty ratings. Similarly, wound size reduction and cost-effectiveness from nutritional interventions demonstrated clinically relevant benefits, though the latter was downgraded to low certainty due to reliance on single-study data and health economic modeling assumptions.

Comparison with Previous Systematic Reviews:

A key strength of this review lies in its restriction to trials involving elderly patients, a population often underrepresented or mixed in earlier analyses. For instance, Huang et al.[20] emphasized caregiver training and patient education as supportive strategies in chronic wound care, but lacked age-specific subgroup data, limiting its applicability to geriatric populations. In contrast, the present review included only studies where outcomes were explicitly reported or extractable for individuals aged ≥60, ensuring that the evidence directly informs geriatric care protocols.

Furthermore, while Bai et al.[21] and Høyland et al.[22] explored digital and remote wound management approaches—including telemedicine, artificial intelligence decision support, and cross-sector continuity—their findings were largely based on feasibility and observational data. Although valuable, these studies exhibited heterogeneity in interventions, lacked blinding, and suffered from underpowered subgroup analyses. The current review, by contrast, pooled data exclusively from controlled comparative studies with predefined endpoints, resulting in a pooled RR of 2.66 (95% CI: 1.88–3.76) for complete healing and moderate-to-high certainty ratings across outcomes. This sharpens the clarity and applicability of conclusions and mitigates the risk of overinterpretation found in less structured syntheses.

Crucial Methodological Advancements:

The present study diverges from past work by rigorously applying GRADE to individual outcomes, thus enabling a transparent hierarchy of evidence strength. Complete wound healing, supported by three low-bias RCTs[17-19], achieved a high certainty rating, while pain and wound size reduction achieved moderate certainty due to sample size constraints and outcome variability. This contrasts with earlier reviews that often-offered blanket conclusions without assessing indirectness, imprecision, or publication bias.

Moreover, while Hisashige & Ohura[14] and the present review both reported economic benefits of nutritional interventions, only this review classified cost-effectiveness as a separate outcome and rated its certainty as low, acknowledging the model-based nature of the data and single-study origin. This critical nuance ensures that clinical and policy decisions are not made based on overinflated economic projections.

Intervention-Specific Insights:

Biological dressings such as honey, silicone, and ADM emerged as consistent frontrunners across studies, both in this review and in earlier literature (e.g., Zeleníková[17], Dehghani[23]. Their low NNTs (≈2) and substantial absolute risk reductions (ARRs >60%) underscore their high clinical utility. However, while earlier studies such as Honde et al.[12] and Landi et al.[13] reported positive outcomes using membrane-based therapies and growth factors, their internal validity was tempered by open-label designs and small sample sizes. In contrast, newer studies integrated pragmatic randomization, blinding where feasible, and protocol registration—elements that elevate the credibility of their findings.

Pharmacist-Relevant Interventions and Therapeutic Class-Specific Outcomes in Geriatric Wound Care

Among the interventions evaluated, several are directly relevant to pharmacist-led or pharmacist-supported wound care strategies, particularly those involving topical therapeutics, nutritional supplementation, and cost-effectiveness considerations. Biologically active dressings—such as honey, silicone, and acellular dermal matrix (ADM)—which pharmacists frequently advise on regarding formulary inclusion and safe application, consistently demonstrated superior wound healing outcomes with a pooled RR of 2.66 (95% CI: 1.88–3.76; high certainty). Notably, honey-based products also achieved moderate-certainty evidence for pain reduction (SMD –1.2; 95% CI: –1.7 to –0.6), suggesting dual therapeutic benefit with minimal systemic absorption, making them particularly suitable for polypharmacy-prone elderly patients. Nutritional interventions, another domain in which pharmacists contribute substantially—through assessment of protein-energy intake, micronutrient adequacy, and supplement counseling—were associated with significantly reduced healing time (MD –16.2 days) and cost savings ($881 per patient), though the certainty of evidence for economic outcomes remained low due to reliance on single-study modeling data. No significant heterogeneity in effect size was noted between pharmacologically active vs. non-pharmacologic interventions; however, those with pharmacist-relevant applications tended to offer multidimensional benefits—clinical, economic, and adherence-related, making them highly practical for implementation in geriatric settings. These findings reinforce the need for future wound care protocols to explicitly integrate the pharmacist's role in optimizing therapeutic class selection, deprescribing, and economic evaluation to improve the safety, efficacy, and scalability of geriatric wound care.

Gaps Addressed and Remaining:

A critical gap addressed by this review, compared to earlier works, is the clear separation of intervention types and outcome domains, as shown in Table 5. Prior reviews often pooled heterogeneous interventions into general effectiveness estimates, thereby blurring distinctions between dressings, systemic therapies, and adjunctive tools. This review mitigates such conflation by mapping each outcome to a corresponding intervention type and GRADE rating, producing a usable framework for clinical decision-making.

Limitations

Despite the methodological strengths of this review, including rigorous inclusion criteria, dual independent review, GRADE certainty assessments, and the exclusive focus on elderly populations—several limitations warrant consideration. First, the total number of studies eligible for meta-analysis was limited, with only three trials contributing pooled risk ratios for complete wound healing. This prevented the use of meta-regression and formal funnel plot analysis, both of which require a minimum of 10 studies for robust inference. While the included studies individually demonstrated low risk of bias and consistent directions, the small sample of meta-analyzable data constrains the generalizability of pooled estimates and limits exploration of potential moderators such as wound type, care setting, or comorbidities. Second, the evidence base was disproportionately weighted toward biologically based interventions such as honey, silicone, and ADM dressings, with fewer studies evaluating systemic interventions, digital health models, or caregiver-led strategies. As a result, some potentially promising interventions, particularly those targeting behavioral change, home-based care, and telemedicine—were either underrepresented or excluded due to lack of comparative data or insufficient geriatric subgroup reporting. Third, although the review focused on elderly populations (age ≥ 60), not all included studies stratified outcomes by advanced age groups (e.g., ≥75 or ≥85 years), frailty status, or cognitive function. These factors are highly relevant in geriatric wound care but remain poorly addressed in existing literature. The lack of long-term follow-up in most studies also limits conclusions about wound recurrence, sustained healing, or patient-centered outcomes such as quality of life. Finally, while economic outcomes were included, only one study reported cost-effectiveness data in a form suitable for synthesis. This limits the ability to draw definitive conclusions about the financial sustainability of interventions, a crucial factor for implementation in resource-limited settings such as home care or long-term care facilities.

Implications for Health Policy and Clinical Guidelines

The findings of this review offer critical insights into evidence-based updates to geriatric wound care guidelines and national chronic wound care strategies. Given the high-certainty evidence supporting the use of biologically active dressings—particularly silicone, honey, and acellular dermal matrix products, these modalities should be prioritized in standardized wound care protocols for elderly patients, both in institutional and community settings. Furthermore, moderate-certainty evidence supporting pain reduction and accelerated healing underscores the importance of selecting interventions that optimize patient-centered outcomes, such as comfort and recovery time, which are crucial for frail older adults. At the policy level, reimbursement frameworks and essential medical supply formularies should be revised to reflect the inclusion of high-impact dressings and nutritional support strategies, particularly in long-term care facilities, home-based care, and primary care settings where the elderly are most often treated. Additionally, health systems should invest in training and infrastructure to support future integration of digital wound care models, such as telemedicine and caregiver-led protocols, which show early promise but require standardization and trial-based validation. By integrating these evidence-based practices into clinical pathways and public health directives, healthcare systems can improve wound healing outcomes, reduce complications and hospitalizations, and optimize resource allocation for aging populations.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review and meta-analysis provide high-quality, internally valid evidence supporting the effectiveness of wound healing interventions in elderly populations. Biologically active dressings—including silicone, honey, and acellular dermal matrix—demonstrated consistent and clinically meaningful improvements in complete wound healing, with a pooled risk ratio of 2.66 (95% CI: 1.88–3.76) and high-grade certainty. Moderate-certainty evidence supports additional benefits in pain reduction, accelerated healing time, and wound size reduction. Although cost-effectiveness was documented in one study, the certainty of this evidence was rated low due to modeling assumptions and lack of replication. By focusing exclusively on studies that included older adults and applying rigorous risk of bias and certainty assessments, this review addresses a long-standing gap in wound care evidence for geriatric populations. It confirms that certain advanced dressings and supportive interventions can substantially improve outcomes for elderly patients with chronic wounds, including pressure ulcers, diabetic foot ulcers, and venous leg ulcers. However, the limited number of high-quality, age-specific RCTs underscores the urgent need for further research. Future trials should incorporate standardized outcome definitions, long-term follow-up, geriatric-specific metrics (e.g., frailty, caregiver support), and economic evaluations to support broad implementation. Integrating digital health tools and caregiver-led strategies into trial design may also improve scalability and applicability to real-world elder care settings.

In summary, the findings of this study offer a strong foundation for updating clinical guidelines and implementing evidence-based wound care practices that are responsive to the physiological, functional, and contextual complexities of aging populations.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Patsanan Kulla: Led conceptualization, study design, literature search, and data extraction. Conducted analysis, synthesized results, and drafted the manuscript. Ensured methodological rigor and geriatric-pharmacy alignment Thanaporn Thakolpattanakul: Assisted in database searching, article screening, risk-of-bias assessment, and data visualization. Contributed to Results, Discussion, and GRADE synthesis

Thanakrit Thakolpattanakul: Supported literature screening, GRADE evaluations, and drafting of figures and tables. Helped maintain consistency across intervention classifications

Khemjira Pinyoying: Participated in data extraction, outcome classification, and manuscript formatting. Assisted in final review and integration of pharmacy-relevant content

Prayuth Poowaruttanawiwit (corresponding author): Conceived the research question and led the overall project direction and supervision. Provided strategic input on methodological framework, meta-analytic modeling, and pharmacist-focused interpretation. Oversaw internal validity assessment, edited all manuscript sections for scientific accuracy, and ensured alignment with publication standards. Acted as corresponding author and primary liaison with the journal

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None to declare

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