

# Reliability of the AMA Guides to the Evaluation of Permanent Impairment

Illinois Center for Injury Prevention

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## Key Points

- The AMA's *Guides* are used to rate loss of function and determine compensation and ability to work after injury or illness.
- The *Guides* have been criticized for several reasons, including but not limited to inconsistency, poor reliability and wide variability.
- There are few studies that evaluate the reliability or construct validity.

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## Background

The *Guides to the Evaluation of Permanent Impairment*, developed by the American Medical Association (AMA), is the most frequently used tool in the United States to assign a permanent impairment rating. A pilot test was conducted to determine the reliability of the fifth and sixth editions for low back injury; to compare rating for individual low back cases between the fifth and sixth editions; and to sort out methodological issues for a larger, more definitive study.

Twenty case histories of low back pain were reviewed by six occupational medicine residents and two fourth-year medical students were divided into two groups - one using the fifth edition and one using the sixth edition - to rate the impairment.

## Findings

The intra-class correlation coefficients within and between raters were relatively high, with wider variability for individual case. Impairment and rating were lower and correlated less well for the sixth edition.

Comparisons	Correlation Coefficient (95% CI)
Among all raters, not controlling for version	0.629 (95% CI = 0.465, 0.795)
Among all fifth edition raters, only	0.724 (95% CI = 0.56, 0.863)
Among all sixth edition raters, only	0.650 (95% CI = 0.450, 0.820)
Average ratings of fifth vs. average ratings of sixth	0.770 (95% CI = 0.506, 0.902)

## What does it mean?

The findings of this study indicate that the sixth edition may not be an improvement over the fifth edition. A research agenda should include investigations of reliability and construct validity for different body sites and organ systems along the entire rating scale and among different categories of raters.